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ABSTRACT

Intended for parents and all citizens concerned about improving Chicago's 592 public schools, this handbook explains how important reading is to a decent education and future employment. Chapter one describes the school improvement campaign called "Schoolwatch," the problems in the Chicago public schools, and the components of effective schools. Chapter two analyzes what it means to know how to read; it explains how reading is tested and evaluated in the Chicago public schools and what the scores mean. It also shows how to look at reading scores for the school system as a whole, for one's own school, and for a child. Chapter three describes in depth the ten ingredients that researchers have identified as crucial for an effective school. For each one, a "report card" gives parents specific things to look for to help them decide whether their school measures up and where there is room for improvement. Chapter four describes how decisions made "downtown" affect the way that children learn (or do not learn) to read in Chicago, and tells what changes are needed so that the school system's huge bureaucracy serves the local school. Finally, chapter five tells exactly how parents, business people, community groups, and journalists can work together in Chicago's "Schoolwatch" program to improve the schools. (HOD)

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All our kids can learn to read

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CHICAGO School Watch

Guide to Parent and Citizen Action

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WE KNEW IT ALL ALONG

Educational research has proven what parents have known all along -- that urban schools can teach almost every child to read well, if our schools have the right ingredients, if our school principals and teachers have the commitment and skills to teach our children properly, if school staff members work as equal partners with parents to create an excellent school.

Just a few years ago, SCHOOLWATCH parents joined the SCHOOLWATCH Campaign because we believe that our children deserve an excellent education. We've been going into our schools for several years now, putting them under a microscope to find out their strengths and weaknesses and pressing for changes as a result.

All Our Kids Can Learn to Read is the product of this experience. It is based on hundreds of hours of hard work by parents in neighborhoods across the city -- Pilsen, Little Village, Near North, Englewood, Chatham, South Shore, Woodlawn, Roseland. These original SCHOOLWATCH parents have been the pioneers, and we now want parents, educators, and concerned citizens in hundreds of other schools to benefit from our experience.

The SCHOOLWATCH Campaign that makes this handbook possible draws on the determination and the insights of parents from across the city. These independent groups and organizations who have participated in the SCHOOLWATCH Campaign include Coalition of South Lawndale Schools (District 10, South Lawndale), Fernwood Local School Advisory Council (District 18, Roseland), Friends of Dumas School (District 14, Woodlawn), McCormick School Parent Teacher Association (District 10, South Lawndale), Near North Community Organization (District 3, Near North), Parent Group of Yale School (District 16, Englewood), Parents/Citizens Involved in Public Education in Greater Englewood (District 16, Englewood), Pirie Local School Advisory Council (District 17, Chatham), United Parents to Enhance Public Education (District 8, Pilsen), Whitney Local School Advisory Council (District 10, South Lawndale), and Whittier Local School Advisory Council (District 8, Pilsen).

This handbook is a direct outgrowth of the dedication and skills of these Chicago parents.

In addition, a number of organizations have aided the SCHOOLWATCH Campaign in a variety of ways and have referred concerned parents to SCHOOLWATCH, including ABLA Mothers Group, Abraham Lincoln Center, Accounters Community Center, Ada S. McKinley South Chicago Neighborhood House, Alternative Schools Network, Association House, Beacon House, Beatrice Caffrey Youth Services, Black Parents United for Educational & Related Services, Black Professional Women, Centers for New Horizons, Chicago Area Project and its affiliates, Chicago Associates for Social Research, Chicago Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, Chicago Organization for Autism, Chicago Panel on Public School Finances, Chicago Region PTA, Chicago United, Chicago Urban League, Chicago Youth Centers, Citizens Council of Southwest Englewood, Citizens Information Service, Citizens Schools Committee, Concerned Young Adults, Council for Disability Rights, Daycare Action Council, Department of Children & Family Services, District 17 Special Education Parents, 18th Street Businessmen, El Hogar del Nino, Englewood Business Association, Erie Neighborhood House, Family LINK, Firman Community Services, First U.S. Congressional District Education Committee, Heart of Uptown Coalition, Jane Addams Community Center, Latino Institute, Lawndale People's Planning & Action Conference, League

of Women Voters of Chicago, Logan Square Neighborhood Association, Lutheran Child & Family Services, Manor Community Church, McKinley Developmental Center, Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Mid-Austin Steering Committee, Mujeres Latinas en Accion, NAACP, Network for Youth Services, Northwest Community Organization, Northwestern University Settlement House, Onward Neighborhood House, Organization of the North East, Paul J. Hall Boys Club, Por Un Barrio Mejor, SER Jobs for Progress, South Chicago Organized People's Effort, South Shore Commission's Task Force on South Shore High School, Substitutes United for Better Schools, Third Baptist Church of God, Trumbull Park Citizens Committee, Trumbull Park Community College, Urban Gateways, Westtown People's Association for Community Action, Youth Network Council, and Youth Services Committee of the Westside; Chicago Housing Authority Local Advisory Councils at Altgeld, Dearborn, Hilliard, Horner, Ickes, Lathrop, Leclaire, Lowden, Madden Park, Stateway, Taylor, Trumbull, Washington Park, Wells, and Wentworth; parent groups at public schools, including Burnham, Clemente, Dumas, Evers, Fuller, Garvey, Guggenheim, Hartigan, Jungman, Mayo, McCosh, Oglesby, O'Keefe, O'Toole, Pershing, Raster, Ross, Sabin, and Westcott.

SCHOOLWATCH could not have survived and flourished without the help of these groups.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Hardly a day passes . . .

. . . without an article in the newspaper saying that America's future depends on a major change in the quality of our schools. Where does that leave Chicago and Chicago's children?

Our city is at a crossroads in its history. The road we take right now will determine whether Chicago can provide enough good jobs to support its 3,000,000 adults and children. The manufacturing jobs that paid a good wage to people with few academic skills are rapidly disappearing. The jobs of the future will require skills in reading, writing, and math -- skills that Chicago's public schools have failed to teach most of Chicago's children. Yet the school system lurches from crisis to crisis, and big plans for improvement that are made downtown at the school board get lost on the way to Pirie Elementary School, Cooper Upper Grade Center, and Lake View High School.

If you are not content to see our children growing up illiterate and our businesses moving to the Sunbelt, this handbook tells what you can do right now to make major improvements in the public schools. It describes how you -- parents, grandparents, business people, journalists, teachers, principals, and others who care about Chicago's children -- can bring about basic improvements in your local Chicago public school -- improvements that will give our children a decent chance in life.

SCHOOLWATCH: CAMPAIGN FOR EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS

People who feel the same way you do have come together to start Chicago SCHOOLWATCH. This long-term campaign has one overriding goal: to bring about major, concrete improvements in each Chicago public school. We're not talking about make-believe changes that exist only on paper. We work for real improvements that will be obvious to anyone who walks through the halls or visits the classrooms.

Although SCHOOLWATCH supports teachers and administrators who are working for better schools, we're convinced that the catalyst for change must come from outside the system -- from informed, sustained involvement by parents, business people, community groups, journalists, and other concerned citizens.

The main activity of SCHOOLWATCH is to organize, train, and advise parent groups in a systematic process for improving their local schools. SCHOOLWATCH parents:

- Learn what should be going on in an effective school.
- Evaluate their school to see what its strengths and weaknesses are.
- Prepare SCHOOLWATCH Report Cards that highlight what they find.
- Press for improvements in their school based on their analysis.

At the time we're writing this, SCHOOLWATCH parents are active in six of the twenty districts that make up the Chicago Public Schools. Even though they've only been at it for a few years, they've brought about real improvements in their local schools (we'll tell you about some of them later in the chapter). They're beginning to make a difference for their children -- in the same way that you can make a difference for yours.

SCHOOLWATCH isn't just for parents. All citizens concerned about the public schools should be asking the same questions that SCHOOLWATCH parent groups are asking.

- Businesses who adopt local Chicago schools should understand how effective their adopted school is -- what its strengths and weaknesses are -- so that a business investment of time and money can bring the greatest return in terms of school improvement.
- Journalists from the Chicago media who cover school issues should be investigating the effectiveness of specific local schools and the barriers that are keeping them from becoming effective.

■ Community groups should be analyzing the effectiveness of local schools in their neighborhood and pressing for needed improvements.

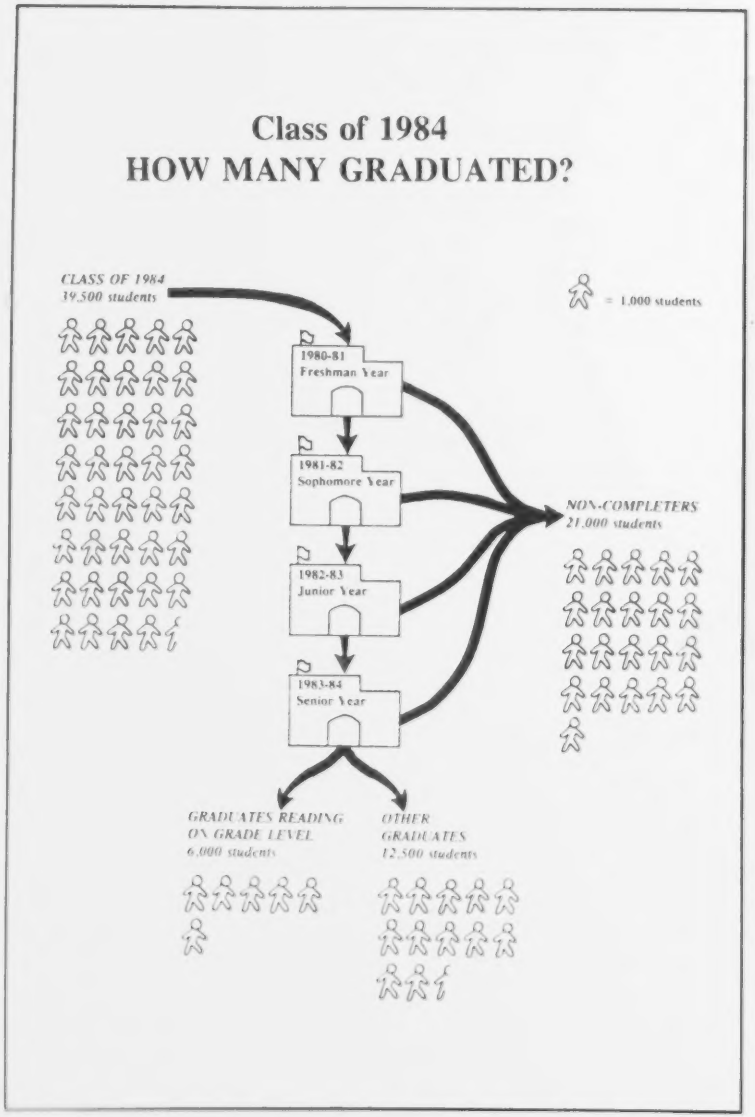
The guidebook you have in your hands lays out the basic information you need to turn your local school around. It tells you what makes an effective school. We put it together using research that has been done around the country about urban schools that are effective in teaching low-income, moderate-income, and minority children. We look at what these effective schools are doing, and explain how to move Chicago's schools in the same direction.

We focus on improving the way that each school teaches its children to read, since that's the school's first responsibility. And we concentrate on elementary schools, because that's where the foundation for reading is laid. Knowing how to read is essential for learning just about anything else a school wants to teach or parents want their children to learn. If your children don't read well in elementary school, they probably won't finish high school and there probably won't be a decent job in their future.

This SCHOOLWATCH handbook is a guide for parent groups, community groups, business people, journalists, and others who feel an urgent need to see Chicago's schools improved now. We hope that it will help people all over the city use the SCHOOLWATCH process: to go into the schools they care about, find out exactly what's going on, and then press for the changes that are critical for making each school work. The handbook can also help teachers, school principals, and other educators who are committed to making their schools effective places for children to learn.

THE SIZE OF THE PROBLEM

Since we began to work on SCHOOLWATCH, we've talked with several hundred parents, business people, and educators about their personal experiences with students attending Chicago schools. We've talked to parents whose teenagers can sound out the words in a sentence but can't tell what the words mean. We've talked to the heads of big businesses who must either reject most Chicago



young people applying for jobs or spend thousands of dollars reteaching them the basic skills.

Statistics about the school system confirm what these people already know firsthand. In an age where literacy means survival, Chicago's schools are not teaching most students to read:

■ 45% of the students who enter Chicago high schools at the ninth grade fail to graduate. (Another 8% transfer out of Chicago's schools.) Most dropouts leave school with totally inadequate basic skills.

■ Even those high school students who stay in school are way behind. In Chicago's segregated neighborhood high schools, only 20% of the seniors, the students who haven't dropped out, read at or above the national average.

■ As a result, more than 450,000 of Chicago's adults are functionally illiterate. They can't read a bus schedule, a personal letter, or a restaurant bill. Among minority groups, 44% of black adults and 56% of Hispanic adults are functionally illiterate.

What's going on here? Why are our children reading so poorly? Is it that the schools just aren't doing their job? That they are failing to come up with successful ways to teach our children what they need to know?

EXCUSES, EXCUSES

Some people think it's the other way around: that the schools aren't failing our children, but that our children are failing the schools. Our kids, in other words, are making the teachers and the administrators and the school board members and all the rest of the people involved in our $1.7 billion school system look bad.

The schools, these people argue, are doing a decent job, considering what they have to work with: a school population which is over 80% minority and two-thirds from low-income families. Not much can be expected of poor and minority children, they say; no school can do enough to overcome such drastic handicaps. For example, one Chicago principal recently told the *Chicago Tribune* that a 70% dropout rate for Hispanic students was the best the schools could do. "If I can get 30% of them across the stage on graduation day," he said, "it's a lot."

This copout is totally unacceptable. The schools are responsible for teaching our children to read. That's the least we should get for $1.7 billion. If one method of teaching doesn't work, it's their job to try another, and another, until they find something that does. And in the meantime they have to hold fast to the fundamental idea behind public education in this country: that all our kids can learn, and that they have a right to do so. This is not an impossible dream; there is solid evidence that schools can teach most children to read regardless of their background.

EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS

Other urban schools around the country have done what most Chicago schools seem unable to do: they have found ways to teach all children, including minority and low-income children -- ways that work.

■ There is the all-black school in New Haven, Connecticut, which once ranked low in reading -- and lowest in math -- of all the schools in that city. After several years of effort by the community, the staff, and outside consultants, students at that school are now above the national average in both reading and math, which puts them ahead of some of the white, middle-class schools in New Haven whose students are supposed to have all the advantages. Parent involvement is high, and teacher and student attendance are at the highest levels in the system.

■ There is the school in Chula Vista, California, which serves a largely Hispanic, low-income area; almost half of entering students speak no English, and three-fourths score below average in basic skills. Staff members and parents, with strong leadership from the principal, have created a school improvement plan and have worked hard over seven years to put it into practice. The plan outlines specific objectives for achievement. Teachers make sure children

understand the high expectations that teachers hold for them, and reward them when they succeed. The school encourages parent involvement: parents review test scores and help define the school's goals, they sign copies of the discipline code and homework policy, and over 80% attend parent-teacher conferences. The effort pays off. By the end of third grade, Spanish-speaking children are scoring above average in reading in Spanish. By the end of sixth grade, 66% of students read from English texts and have math scores at or above grade level.

■ There is the Michigan school which serves a community made up almost entirely of recent migrants from the South, mostly white, mostly low-income. Teachers at the school share a simple, nonheroic belief: that their children can and should be able to read, write, and do arithmetic at grade level. And the children do. Nobody goes to remedial classes. If they don't learn what they're supposed to the first time, teachers go back and teach them a second or third time until they do. Students at this predominantly low-income urban school score above the average in reading achievement for all schools in Michigan.

What are these schools doing that works -- for all children, black and white, English- and Spanish-speaking, middle-class and poor? Can we find out, and can we get our own schools in Chicago to do the same? That's what this SCHOOLWATCH handbook is about.

WHAT MAKES SUCCESS?

The schools described above, and others like them, have been studied a lot in recent years. They are labelled effective schools. These schools make a difference in children's lives. Students who attend them are learning to read. Researchers wanted to find out why these schools succeed while others fail. They spent months observing and interviewing to find out what makes some schools effective, especially for low-income and minority children. And they've come out with a surprising amount of agreement about what the key ingredients of an effective school are.

Most effective schools, for example, have energetic principals who spend much of their time in the classrooms actively coordinating the school's instructional program for children. Such principals see themselves first and foremost as the educational leader of the school (not the head paper shuffler). They develop, together with teachers, a consistent plan for learning throughout the school, a plan which assumes, and insists, that all kids can learn. They regularly visit classrooms and work with teachers to make sure that the plan is being carried out -- or changed, if crucial parts are not working. They arrange school schedules so that classroom learning activities are not constantly interrupted by assemblies, drills, p.a. announcements. They make their school safe and orderly by strictly enforcing a reasonable set of rules for student behavior.

Principals in ineffective schools, by contrast, busy themselves with routine administrative tasks. They don't invade the teachers' "turf" -- and so they don't know much about what's really going on inside the classrooms. They may prepare written plans required by the school system about how they will improve reading achievement or boost attendance, but then they file them away and forget about them. The school is marred by discipline problems, schedule disruptions, and low teacher morale. When students have learning problems, ineffective principals don't review the tests, observe the classroom, talk with teachers, change plans and strategies; they shrug and insist, "we're doing the best we can," or they encourage teachers to refer large numbers of children for special education.

Educational leadership by the principal has been consistently identified by researchers as one key ingredient of an effective school. In this SCHOOLWATCH handbook, we draw on this research to explain ten key ingredients that can make your school effective. These ingredients are listed on the next page.

HOW CAN WE CREATE 592 EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS?

At this point, you may be a little puzzled. The ten ingredients we list on page 8 may sound like common sense. And you might have taken it for granted that the schools were already doing most of these things. Unfortunately, we have found that these ingredients are rarely present when you look closely at what is happening in Chicago schools day-to-day. And the reading and dropout statistics that we cited earlier show the results.

The school system makes one plan after another for improving education. (The Board of Education even has its own Effective Schools Project.) But when you analyze your local school, you find that these fine-sounding plans on paper are not followed through in practice. Old habits, old patterns keep things pretty much the same in the principal's office, in the classroom, in the halls, on the playground.

Even though there are many dedicated educators working in the school system, these educators by themselves will not bring about the necessary changes. The catalyst for real changes that will make our 592 schools effective must come from parents and other members of the public who will not settle for reforms that exist only on paper. Putting the responsibility to improve the schools on parents and citizens may be a surprising idea to some. But remember that this country was founded on the idea that active informed citizens are absolutely essential to making things work.

SCHOOLWATCH parents have begun to make their local schools work. They have taken the list of ten ingredients into their schools and pressed to make them a reality. Some of their achievements:

- At Yale School, parents interviewed candidates for principal to get their ideas for creating an effective school. They chose a principal who has committed herself to work with parents to develop an effective school.

- At Pirie School, parents found that their children were seldom reading books as part of reading instruction. Children were spending all their time on worksheets. Parents organized a Read-A-Thon that is now an integral part of the school program, in which students read books on their own and receive awards for their independent reading.

- At McCormick School, parents fought successfully for a thirteen-room addition to their severely overcrowded school, and

TEN INGREDIENTS OF AN EFFECTIVE SCHOOL

1 ***PRINCIPAL IS EDUCATIONAL LEADER*** – The principal provides strong leadership and works toward clear educational goals for the school.

2 ***SAFE ATTRACTIVE SCHOOL*** – The staff creates an atmosphere in the school that is orderly, safe, serious, and attractive – without being oppressive.

3 ***STAFF COMBATS TRUANCY AND DROPOUT*** – The school makes serious efforts to reduce truancy and dropout.

4 ***PARENTS WORK TO IMPROVE THE LEARNING PROGRAM*** – Parents involve themselves in improving the educational program, and the school welcomes parent participation and responds to parent concerns.

5 ***STAFF BELIEVES STUDENTS CAN LEARN*** – The principal and teachers firmly believe that their students can learn as well as anybody, and they work hard to make that happen.

6 ***LEARNING TO READ IS THE FIRST PRIORITY*** – The school staff defines learning to read in its broadest sense as the school's first priority, and uses all school subjects and resources to make sure that this happens.

7 ***STUDENT TIME IS SPENT MOSTLY ON LEARNING ACTIVITIES*** –School schedules and day-to-day practices of all school staff help children spend as much time as possible actively involved in learning activities.

8 ***FREQUENT CHECKS OF STUDENT PROGRESS*** – The principal and teachers check frequently to see how well children are learning, and use this information to make the educational program more effective.

9 ***STAFF DEVELOPMENT IS TIED TO SPECIFIC SCHOOL GOALS*** –Staff development programs help teachers achieve the priority educational goals for the school.

10 ***SPECIAL PROGRAMS ARE CAREFULLY DESIGNED*** – Special programs (bilingual education, special education, Chapter 1, and so on) are of high quality, are carefully matched to student needs, and are coordinated closely with the overall learning program of the school.

they have worked on an equal basis with the staff to make the plans for this addition.

■ At Whittier School, parents found that children received little homework. They developed a plan with the school staff through which homework is now regularly assigned and corrected.

■ At Cardenas School, parents stopped the staff from referring large numbers of Spanish-speaking children for special education classes without proper student evaluations.

Parents at these schools won these improvements with training and help from SCHOOLWATCH, and their successes have encouraged them to press for more and more changes. In the chapters that follow we tell you how to do the same. We explain more about each of the ten ingredients of an effective school. We tell you in more detail what the staff should be doing if these ingredients are really being blended together in your school. We suggest specific ways to check out your school by interviewing school people and watching what goes on. And we tell you how to press for changes that will make your school a place where all our kids learn to read.

READING AND CHICAGO'S FUTURE

SCHOOLWATCH focuses on teaching reading as the most important thing a school must do in order to be effective. Schools should of course do many other jobs. A good school should develop students' creative talent, introduce them to computers and biology, teach them how to play violin or left guard or the lead role in *A Raisin in the Sun*. But there is pretty universal agreement that teaching students to read with real understanding is the first responsibility of the schools.

We all know that there are a lot fewer jobs these days for people who lack basic skills in reading and math. Children who don't learn these skills in schools will have a hard time making a decent living for themselves and their own families in years to come. What you may not realize -- but what many recent studies have pointed out -- is that the failure of the schools threatens not only our children's future, but the future of the city itself as a place for us to live and work and raise our families.

Chicago's past prosperity has depended largely on manufacturing. Its factories could absorb large numbers of unskilled workers, as our parents -- the Southern migrants and European and Latin American immigrants -- discovered. But today, many of the factories that make tractors and television sets are failing, or pulling out and heading elsewhere.

Business people, community groups, and city planners concerned about Chicago's economic future see the city as a center for banking, finance, health care, and specialized manufacturing. And they expect that most new jobs in Chicago will be created by small and medium-sized businesses in our neighborhoods. We can hold onto the businesses we have and encourage new ones to get started if -- if the city's schools can give our children the basic skills that will be essential for almost every good job in every field.

If the schools cannot improve radically, the promised future will never come. People with the ideas and resources for new industries will go to the Sunbelt or the suburbs, where they can find decent schools for their own families and a workforce with the skills they need. Young people from the suburbs with good basic skills will beat out our children in the competition for the few good jobs that remain. The city's economy will decline and so will its population. There will be fewer jobs to go around -- not just in new businesses, but in all the other activities that keep the city going: we'll need fewer bus drivers, fewer supermarket clerks, fewer hairdressers -- and fewer teachers.

We must take urgent action right now to avoid these grim possibilities. But business people and city planners and editorial writers keep coming back to insist that if most Chicagoans are going to have an economic future, the schools must be drastically improved. We must act now to make that happen, for our children's future and our own.

PLAN OF THE HANDBOOK

We have described what everyone already knows: how important reading is to a decent education and to getting a good job. Our schools are failing to teach a substantial number of our children this skill. Remedying that failure must be the school system's highest priority. And to really solve the problem we must change Chicago's 592 schools -- each one of them. This SCHOOLWATCH handbook tells how to start.

Chapter 2 analyzes what it means to know how to read. It explains how reading is tested and evaluated in the Chicago Public Schools and what the scores mean. It shows how to look at reading scores for the school system as a whole, for your own school, and for your children.

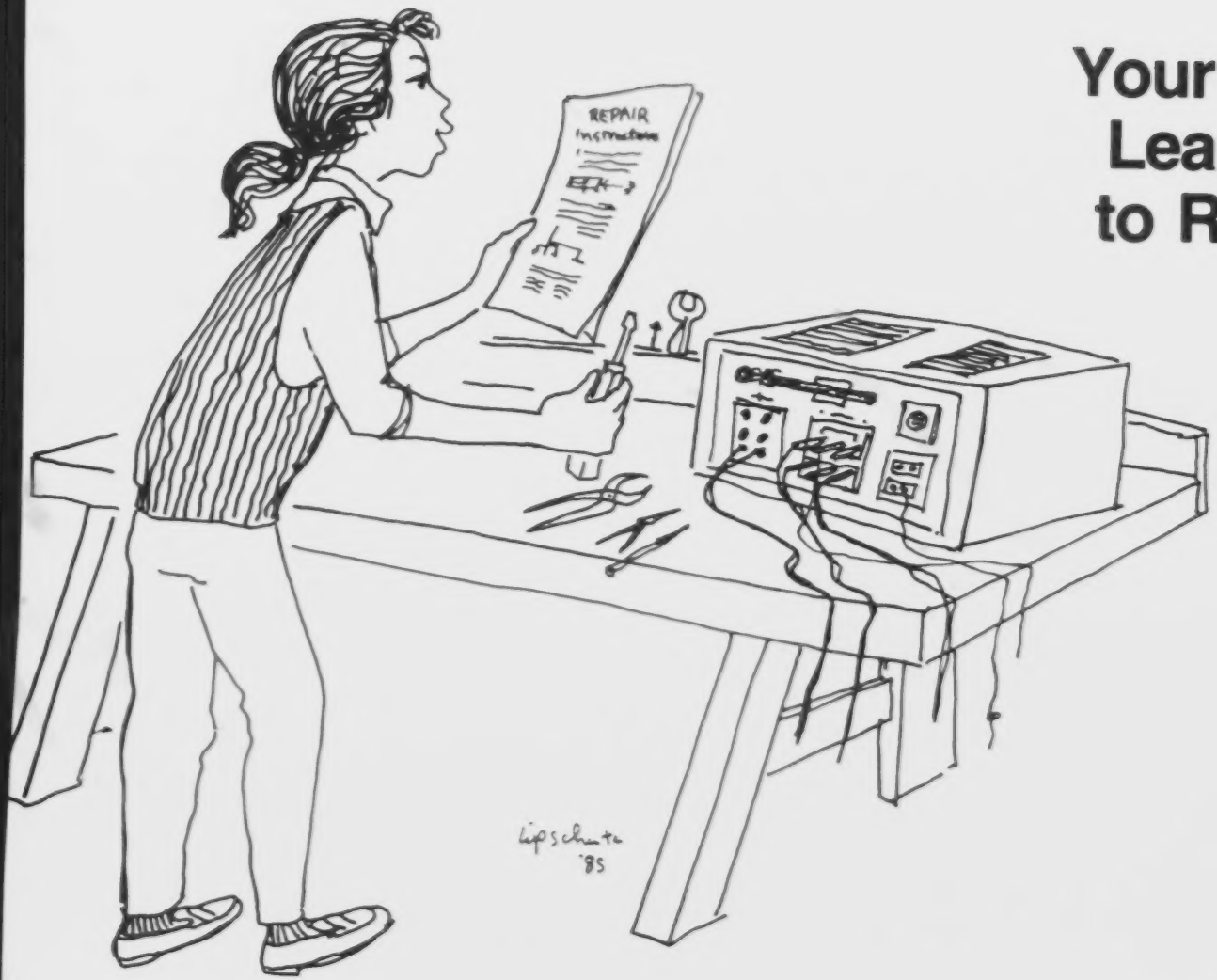
Chapter 3 is the heart of the handbook. It describes the ten ingredients that researchers have identified as crucial for an effective school. For each one, a SCHOOLWATCH Report Card gives you specific things to look for to help you decide whether your school measures up -- and where there's room for improvement.

No public school operates in isolation. Your local school is part of the neighborhood, but it is also part of a huge, complex school system. Chapter 4 describes how decisions made "downtown" affect the way that children learn (or do not learn) to read in Chicago, and tells what changes need to happen so that the school system's huge bureaucracy serves your local school.

Chapter 5 moves from information to action. It tells exactly how parents, business people, community groups, and journalists can work together in SCHOOLWATCH to improve our schools, so that they will, at the very least, teach our kids to read.

CHAPTER 2

Are Your Kids Learning to Read?



To investigate how your school measures up . . .

. . . you have to collect some evidence about how well your children are reading. This chapter discusses three important questions you should think about in gathering this information:

- What kind of reading skills will our children need when they grow up?
- What do the reading scores mean (the ones that are published in the newspaper each year), and what can we learn from them?
- What other evidence besides the tests can we use to judge how well our children are learning to read?

THE READING SKILLS CHILDREN NEED

Let's start with an example. One promising occupation in which jobs are now available is in repairing electronic equipment. The manuals describing how to make these repairs are written at the twelfth-grade level, and the instructions in them change monthly. Working alone, a repairer needs to read and understand these manuals, and then apply them constantly to solve problems.

Our schools should be giving young people the basic reading skills that will help them get into training programs for jobs like these. Companies are willing to teach young people the specific technical skills they need, if these young people have basic reading (and math) skills to build on. But if they can't read and understand what they read, they won't even qualify to be trained. As things stand now, only 15% of students who start ninth grade both graduate from high school and have reading skills good enough to read that repair manual. The rest are cut out of the market for this kind of skilled work.

Let's think a little more about what it means to read and understand what you read. Take a sentence from a Chicago newspaper:

Airport officials at O'Hare were disturbed today when they discovered that the wooded areas between their runways were home for several dozen deer.

Part of being able to read is just being able to sound out the words in this sentence, whether or not they make sense to you.

Part of being able to read is going beyond sounding out words to understand directly what the sentence says. Your children, for example, should be able to tell you what the sentence means in their own words, or answer simple questions like "What animals were living in the wooded areas at the airport?"

And part of being able to read is to know how to draw conclusions that are not specifically stated in what you read. For example, a child who really reads and understands the sentence above should be able to give a reasonable answer to the question, "Why do you think the airport officials were disturbed to find that deer were living in the woods at the airport?"

Finally, part of being able to read is to enjoy reading. Children who are really comfortable reading will be enthusiastic about what they can learn from magazines, novels, newspapers, or the instructions for operating a computer.

Only if your school teaches your children all these things can it really take credit for having taught them to read. If your children can sound out the words in a sentence but can't tell you what they mean, they are not reading at all. If your children can understand simple facts from a paragraph, but can't draw conclusions that aren't stated specifically (for example, that the airport officials might be afraid the deer will run in front of a plane taking off and cause it to crash), then they are probably not reading well enough to get a good job later. And if children learn some of these skills, but also grow to hate reading in the process, then it is unlikely that they will be adequate readers as adults.

How can you tell whether the children in your school are really learning to read?

THE CITY-WIDE READING TESTS

One way to check on children's reading progress is to look at the results of the City-Wide Testing Program. Each year, most students in the school system from grades 2 through 12 take a set of achievement tests that give us one indication of how well they are reading. Test results for each child, for each Chicago school, and for the Chicago schools as a whole are compared with the results for other children around the country who have taken the same tests.

The results for Chicago schools are then released and published in the newspaper. The results for individual students are given to their teachers and their parents.

TESTS GIVEN IN FIRST TO EIGHTH GRADE

The tests given in grades 1 through 8 are the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills. The part of the test that is used to judge how well a school is doing in teaching children to read is called the "Reading Comprehension" subtest. In grades 1, 2, and 3, the tests check mostly how well children recognize words. For example, a child may be given a picture of a horse and then a choice of five words to describe the picture, one of which is "horse."

In grades 4 through 8, the test changes. Children are asked to read a paragraph like the one on the right and use this information to choose the best answer for a question.

As children get older, the written passages they have to read get longer and the questions get harder. In the tests for older children, they usually cannot just look back at the written passage and pull out some facts to answer the question. They have to draw conclusions that are not obvious. For example, the passage may describe something that happened, and the question may ask the child to predict what is most likely to happen next.

Some people think silver is used only to make jewelry. But silver also has many other uses. For example, it is often used in manufacturing motion picture film.

QUESTION -- What would be the best title for this paragraph?

A. *How to Make Jewelry*

B. *The Many Uses of Silver*

C. *Manufacturing Motion Picture Film*

D. *Silver Is Expensive*

Children must answer about fifty questions like the one on the previous page on the Reading Comprehension part of the Iowa Tests. Then the number each child gets right is compared with the average number of right answers for a national cross-section of children the same age. For the elementary schools, school-by-school results are reported in the form of "grade level scores." Each score has two numbers separated by a decimal point (6.2, 7.4, and so on). The first number refers to the year in school, the second to the month of that year. A child whose score is 6.2 is reading at the average level of a sixth-grader in the second month of school; a score of 7.4 means that child is reading as well as an average seventh-grader in the fourth month.

The grade level scores for the Goldblatt Elementary School, from the tests given in May 1985, are presented as an example in the next column (bottom right). Look at the results for the fifth grade. Here's what they mean:

■ The average score for fifth graders at Goldblatt was 4.4. This score means that the average fifth grader at Goldblatt was reading only as well as the average child in other parts of the country who was in the fourth month of fourth grade.

■ The national average for each grade is presented below each Goldblatt example. The average fifth-grade child across the nation who took the test in May is reading at the fifth grade, eighth month (5.8) level. Comparing Goldblatt with the national average, you can see that the average fifth grader at Goldblatt (who has a 4.4 score) is over a year behind the average child nationally.

When you understand these reading test scores, you can tell whether children at your school are scoring below the national average, at the national average, or above the national average. Low scores are one tip-off that your school is doing a poor job of teaching your children to read. They should be the basis for your demanding some changes.

HOW READING SCORES WORK -- NATIONAL AVERAGES

	2nd grade	5th grade	8th grade
October	2.2	5.2	8.2
December	2.4	5.4	8.4
February	2.6	5.6	8.6
April	2.8	5.8	8.8

AN EXAMPLE -- COMPARING READING SCORES FROM GOLDBLATT ELEMENTARY SCHOOL WITH THE NATIONAL AVERAGES

	2nd grade	5th grade	8th grade
Goldblatt scores	2.2	4.4	7.2
National average	2.8	5.8	8.8

TESTS GIVEN IN HIGH SCHOOL

The school system gives similar tests to students in high school in grades 9 through 12. These tests, published by the same company that publishes the Iowa Tests for elementary school, are called the "Tests of Achievement and Proficiency," or TAP Tests. They have a Reading Comprehension section similar to the Iowa Tests, except that the passages that students need to read are much longer and the questions are more complicated. (We will not explain here exactly how the scores for these tests are reported to the public.)

PROBLEMS WITH CITY-WIDE TESTS: COACHING AND CHEATING

We said that you can use test results as one indication of how well your school is teaching children to read. However, test results alone may not give you a true picture of what is going on.

First of all, multiple choice tests (where you choose answer a, b, c, or d) are not much like the reading that a person does after leaving school. Recall the manual for repairing electronic equipment. Repairers don't answer multiple choice questions about the manual; they have to read it, understand it, and then figure out what repairs to make. Standardized tests can't measure such complicated skills completely.

Still, the tests are one good indicator of how well our schools are doing if -- and this is a big if -- children are not receiving excessive coaching, and if teachers and principals are not cheating in the way they give the test.

"Coaching" children means giving them practice drills that are very much like the test, although they don't include any of the actual test questions. Most people agree that children benefit from a little practice drilling like this, so they can get used to taking tests. However, we have observed some elementary schools where the educational program devotes several hours each school day to exercises similar to those that appear on the Iowa Test. Children in these schools seldom read books, they seldom read for their own enjoyment, and they grow to hate reading. They are not really learning to read in a way that will be helpful to them later in life. Instead, they are being drilled to score better on the Iowa Test.

The destructive effects of such coaching show up later. Children who are drilled to pass the tests at one level are not really getting the broad foundation in reading skills and reading experience they need to do well at higher levels. That's one reason why reading comprehension scores in many Chicago schools start to take a big drop between the fourth and fifth grade (when questions begin checking whether you understand what you read) and between eighth grade and high school (when the reading passages on the test become much more complicated).

Beyond excessive coaching, there is the problem of outright cheating. There are a number of ways that teachers and principals can try to make their schools look good on the tests. The following methods for cheating have all been documented in individual Chicago Public Schools within the past few years:

■ In 1983 the schools started using a new version of the Iowa Test, which will probably be used for the next several years. The school system's research department tries to keep track of all test copies. However, with thousands of copies of a test floating around the city, it is inevitable that some people will take individual copies, or xerox them, or make notes on the questions. Then, next year, the teacher or principal can prepare practice materials that are based on the test, or can actually give students practice on the test itself. If these children score higher than other children, it doesn't mean they read better, it just means they learned the answers to that particular test.

■ Students taking the test must finish each section in a set time. National averages are based on these time limits. If teachers allow their classes extra time to take the test, students will score higher than they otherwise would.

■ All elementary schoolchildren are supposed to take the test, except for some students who are seriously handicapped or who can't understand English. If a principal or teacher either fails to test other students who might score low, or excludes their test scores

from the school's average, this will make the school's average test score higher.

If you are starting a long-term effort to improve reading in your school, you must investigate possible coaching and cheating. On the right, we list some things you need to find out about the reading test scores for your school to figure out whether the tests are being administered correctly.

THE READING INSTRUCTION PROGRAM

Until recently, the school system required the use of a controversial curriculum for teaching children to read. It's called "Chicago Mastery Learning Reading" (CMLR). This program divides the process of learning to read into several hundred very specific skills. Students are supposed to learn these skills by working on them one-by-one in workbooks. Usually these workbooks give a child a short paragraph to read and then ask multiple choice questions about the paragraph. SCHOOLWATCH parents, as well as many teachers, have been highly critical of CMLR. SCHOOLWATCH has charged that CMLR doesn't teach children to read with real understanding and that it makes reading a dull task that children grow to hate.

Recently, under pressure from teachers, parents, and many reading experts, the school system decided to drop CMLR as a required program. It is likely that the reading curriculum that takes its place will use reading books (called basal readers) that are selected by each local school. Most basal readers have progress tests as a part of them, and you should expect that your child's teacher will be able to explain how your child is doing on these tests. Progress on these reading tests that are part of the basal reading program are another clue that you can use to judge your child's progress.

You should compare your children's scores on the City-Wide Tests with their scores on the tests that are part of the basal reader. If there are big differences, you should dig deeper.

SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT ACHIEVEMENT TESTING IN YOUR SCHOOL

ABOUT PREPARING STUDENTS FOR THE TESTS

- When you visit classes, do you find students spending a lot of time on exercises that are just like the reading tests?
- Is there any evidence that teachers are preparing students for the tests by reviewing old copies or giving students worksheets that include material from the tests?

ABOUT ADMINISTERING THE TESTS

- Is the process for distributing tests set up to minimize chances for teachers taking copies?
- What steps are being taken to make sure that teachers don't give extra time to work on the tests or otherwise change the procedures for giving the tests?
- What steps are being taken to insure that test answer sheets can't be tampered with after the testing?
- Is there any evidence that students who might score low on the test are encouraged to be absent, or are not given the test?

ABOUT THE TEST RESULTS

- What percentage of the students enrolled in your school were tested and had their scores counted in your school's test results? If the figure is less than 90%, what is the reason?
- Comparing the achievement levels of students at the same grade over several years, are there suspicious jumps in the results?

ABOUT LEADERSHIP FROM THE PRINCIPAL

- Is there evidence that your school principal is striving to eliminate inappropriate coaching or cheating of the kind indicated by the questions above?

OTHER WAYS TO JUDGE HOW WELL YOUR SCHOOL IS TEACHING CHILDREN TO READ

We have talked to many parents, employers, and teachers who had been led to believe, based on children's test scores or their school grades, that these children could read, only to find out through personal experience that they really can't at all. As we said at the beginning of this chapter, children who really know how to read should not only be able to sound out words, but should also know how to draw information and conclusions out of what they read. And they should enjoy reading. If you're trying to judge your school's effectiveness in teaching children to read, you need to gather some other kinds of evidence besides test scores.

Appendix A has a series of short reading selections for checking the reading level of children in grades three through eight. A child who is reading on grade level should be able to read and explain the selection for that grade. The authors of a book called *What Did You Learn in School Today?* developed these selections so parents could judge roughly how well their children are learning to read. These selections won't make you a reading expert. But if you find a big gap between your children's test scores or report cards and the results of this short test, you should investigate further.

You can pick up another danger signal if your children say they hate reading. Children who become good readers must read on their own. If your children hate reading and never read unless they are forced to, they probably won't learn to read very well; that's another sign that the school isn't doing its job of getting kids going on reading.

Another danger signal can be spotted through observing in the classroom. You should see children reading different kinds of materials -- stories, plays, novels, magazines, poetry -- as well as worksheets and flashcards. If you only see teachers using worksheets and short reading passages that look like tests, your children are not really learning to read.

A final danger signal we suggest you check out is the dropout rate and the reading scores at your local high school (these figures are available from SCHOOLWATCH). If the percentage of students at your local high school who drop out without graduating is more than 30% or the percent of students reading at the national average is less than 50% (as it is in many Chicago high schools), then you need to ask how well your elementary school has prepared its students to succeed later on. If elementary schools were really teaching children to read with understanding and enthusiasm, fewer would drop out or be illiterate later on. If you can't improve the way your elementary school is teaching your children when they're young, their chances of their making it through high school and learning to read well are poor.

ARE YOUR KIDS LEARNING TO READ?

Weigh all the evidence. Look at the test results. Check out your own children's reading skills and their attitudes about reading firsthand. And if you don't like what you find, it's time to put your local school under a microscope and figure out what can be done to make it better.

CHAPTER 3

How Does Your School Measure Up?

WHAT MAKES A GOOD SCHOOL?

In the last twenty years, people have spent a lot of time and money trying to settle this question. As we discussed in Chapter 1, some answers have come recently through studies of successful urban schools where low-income, moderate-income, and minority students learn to read well -- schools that make a difference in children's lives. After spending thousands of hours examining these schools, researchers have come up with a surprising amount of agreement about what makes good schools work. (Most of this research has looked at elementary schools, so we can best use it as the basis for investigating elementary schools in Chicago.)

There is no reason why Chicago's elementary schools can't do the same thing for children that these effective schools are doing. But these changes won't just happen in your local school -- unless you and others go in and start pushing for them.

But before you can push for changes, you have to learn how to judge your school's strengths and weaknesses. And before you can judge how your school measures up, you have to understand in specific terms what should be going on in an effective school.

Based on the research about effective schools, we have identified ten key ingredients (listed in Chapter 1) that you should find in your local school if it is effective. Below, we explain more about each of these and why it is important. We break down each ingredient into four to eight "effective practices" that you should see in your school if a particular ingredient is really present. These effective practices are listed on the SCHOOLWATCH Report Cards that appear throughout the chapter.

You will notice, as you read this chapter, that the ten ingredients overlap and support each other. We talk first, for example, about the importance of a strong principal; then later we explain that principals should oversee a clear school discipline policy, arrange training experiences for teachers, and work to minimize student and teacher absence. This kind of overlap is inevitable. A school is a complex place, and you need to bring a lot of ingredients together to make it work.

In discussing the ten ingredients, we begin at the top. We look first at the one ingredient that shows up more than any other in schools that work: a first-rate principal.

Ingredient 1
PRINCIPAL IS EDUCATIONAL LEADER

The principal provides strong leadership and works toward clear educational goals for the school.

The key words here are educational leader. Good principals make it their top priority to see that the day-to-day process of teaching and learning is being improved all the time. They recognize that major improvements won't occur unless the principal is constantly pushing, inspiring, hoping, helping, finding a way to get things done.

Specific Plan for School Improvement. The first step for a principal who is serious about creating an effective school is that she develops a specific plan for school improvement. The principal should not develop this plan in a vacuum; teachers, parents, and students should help decide about what the school's strengths and weaknesses are and how it needs to be improved. (In Chapter 4, we describe how the school system could establish School Improvement Councils in every school to carry out this process.)

The principal should insure that this plan is put in writing, and it should be very specific. What are the reading levels of children in the school and when do children start to fall behind? What kinds of special help do teachers need to teach children who are doing poorly? Do teachers receive books and test results when they most need them? A good school improvement plan identifies problems like these and then details the specific steps to solve them.

Once a school improvement plan is prepared, it can't just be filed away. The plan must be explained to teachers and parents, and the principal must set about the task of seeing that the plan is carried out.

REPORT CARD FOR INGREDIENT 1
Principal Is Educational Leader

The school has been rated on the following scale:

4 - *OUTSTANDING* - This effective practice is consistently used in the school. The school has a major strength in this area, and there are no significant weaknesses.

3 - *GOOD* - This effective practice is frequently used in this school. The school has some important strengths in this area, but there are also some important weaknesses in this area that need to be overcome.

2 - *NEEDS IMPROVEMENT* - This effective practice, or some aspects of it, are occasionally used in this school. However, weaknesses in this area outweigh strengths.

1 - *MAJOR DEFICIENCY* - There is little evidence that this effective practice, or important aspects of it, are employed in this school. There is a major deficiency in this area.

RATING

☐ The principal has a clear written plan for improving the school's learning program that is understood and acted on by the school community. Comments: _____

_____

_____

RATING

☐ The principal spends much time in classrooms helping teachers do a better job. Comments: _____

_____

_____

☐ The principal actively coordinates the work of any school board employee in her building. Comments: _____

_____

_____

☐ The principal delegates routine administrative tasks to spend more time on educational issues. Comments: _____

_____

_____

☐ The principal is viewed by staff as a strong, but fair, leader. Comments: _____

_____

_____

For example, some key steps in carrying out a school improvement plan are to make sure that teachers who must coordinate their work meet with each other, that teachers have sufficient time for planning, and that teachers use available planning time well. The day-to-day commitment of the school principal to follow through on the improvement plan is vital in creating an effective school.

Time in the Classroom. A principal who is serious about improving the school's educational program spends a great deal of time in the classroom, observing teachers and helping them to do a better job. The principal of one effective school in Michigan makes it a point to visit each teacher at least 30 times each year. (In some schools, other administrators or master teachers can do this direct work with teachers, if they get very strong backing from the principal.)

Once it is clear from classroom visits what problems need to be corrected, a good principal follows through by talking with teachers, listening and making suggestions about how to improve, calling meetings of teachers who need to coordinate with each other, getting special training for teachers with problems or teachers who want to develop new skills.

Bad principals will tell you that they would like to spend more time out in the classrooms, but they just have too many other responsibilities. But good principals create time to spend with teachers by delegating routine responsibilities, like filling out reports, to other staff members.

No Excuses. A principal who is an educational leader avoids getting bogged down in administrivia and stays on top of everything going on in the school. She won't tell you that she can't get her teachers to change because they all have tenure, that she can't get any heat in the building because the custodian reports to someone downtown. She believes that any person who works in her school -- counselors, teachers, teacher aides, clerks, custodians -- must coordinate their efforts to create a first-rate educational program. And she knows that this coordination will not take place unless she holds every person who works in the school accountable to her for making the school's program work better.

Not a Dictator. Good principals are strong leaders, but they aren't dictators. They listen to teachers. Their staffs believe they are firm about their beliefs, but fair, and believe that most decisions are based on what is best for children. For example, good teachers are assigned to teach the students who need them most; teachers aren't assigned to difficult classes because the principal dislikes them.

Ingredient 2
SAFE ATTRACTIVE SCHOOL

The staff creates an atmosphere in the school that is orderly, safe, serious, and attractive -- without being oppressive.

If you spend time in any building -- a home, a store, a restaurant, a school -- you get a feeling for the "atmosphere" of that place and the effect it has on you. The atmosphere of one store, for example, may be inviting and cheerful, while another may be unpleasant and disorganized. In an effective school, you will find an atmosphere that is orderly, safe, serious, and attractive, without being a military camp. If such an atmosphere is lacking -- if the building is chaotic, or the teachers and students feel unsafe, or the activities are more "fun and games" than serious work -- it is hard for much learning to take place. There are two main areas in which the principal and teachers either create this good atmosphere for learning or fail to create it: the way discipline is handled and the way the school building itself is maintained.

Planning That Avoids Problems. Without good discipline, learning cannot take place. Children cannot learn when students are insulting teachers or running uncontrolled through the halls. But on the other hand, effective schools are not places where teachers are constantly yelling at students, where students must always march in line, where large numbers of children are thrown out of school.

REPORT CARD FOR INGREDIENT 2

Safe Attractive School

The school has been rated on the following scale:

4 - OUTSTANDING
3 - GOOD
2 - NEEDS IMPROVEMENT
1 - MAJOR DEFICIENCY

RATING

☐ The school is run by a discipline code that is fair, clear, written down, and communicated to the whole school community.
Comments:

☐ Staff tries to get at the cause of a student's misbehavior and eliminate it. Suspension is used only as a last resort. Comments:

☐ Each class is run by clear behavior rules, and teachers control student behavior without constantly stopping the teaching process.
Comments:

RATING

☐ All staff play a part in maintaining discipline in halls, bathrooms, playgrounds, and cafeterias. They are orderly, but not oppressive.
Comments:

☐ Special purpose facilities -- food services, libraries, gymnasiums -- are high quality and frequently used by children.
Comments:

☐ The school is kept clean and in good repair.
Comments:

☐ Even if the school is old, the staff takes many small steps to make it cheerful and comfortable.
Comments:

☐ The school is not overcrowded.
Comments:

In effective schools, the staff has developed procedures for avoiding most discipline problems before they occur. The cornerstone of good discipline is a clear reasonable discipline code that is specific for this particular school. The code must make it clear what kinds of behavior will not be permitted. The code must be distributed and repeatedly explained to teachers, students, parents, so that it will be apparent to everyone when a student is misbehaving.

But a good discipline code is only the first step. A written code, even a very good one, means nothing unless it is carried out consistently. The same behavior by different children, at different times, in the presence of different teachers, must be treated the same way. Parents know, of course, that absolute consistency is impossible, and that on a good day you can laugh at something that drives you crazy on a bad day. But if students believe that the way discipline is administered is arbitrary -- that certain teachers have it in for them or that certain kids can get away with anything -- the school will have constant discipline problems.

Not Just Punishment. Effective discipline is not just punishment. When a child is "sent to the office," discipline should involve trying to get at the root of the problem. Is the child misbehaving because he is behind in school? Is there a particular teacher who is sending many children to the office and needs help in learning how to maintain order in a classroom?

If a school is going to help children who cause discipline problems, it is essential that the school suspend or expel children only as a last resort. The school should have methods for punishing students -- such as in-school suspension -- that keep children in school and insure that they do not fall further behind in their studies.

Effective schools don't just concentrate on dealing with misbehavior. They also praise students for good behavior. A study of effective schools concludes that students in effective schools are frequently praised for behaving well, for helping out, for helping each other. One principal gives teachers a stack of postcards each year and asks them to send a note to parents when their child does something good during the year.

Teachers Don't Walk Past Problems. If the school has a clear plan for discipline that is actually carried out, teachers are more likely to take major responsibility for making this plan work day-to-day. They know that they will be backed up if they discipline children for not following the rules -- that teachers aren't on their own. Teachers will feel confident in disciplining a student anywhere in the school, instead of walking past problems. A recent news story told of a lifeguard who watched a child drown because "he wasn't in my part of the pool." Teachers in effective schools take responsibility for maintaining discipline wherever they happen to be.

Good Discipline in the Classroom. Anyone who has gone to school can remember that some teachers maintained almost perfect discipline and never had to send a student to the office, while others let the very same students get completely out of control. Teachers who maintain good discipline make their own classroom rules clear at the beginning of the school year. They explain their rules and follow through on them.

If you observe in a classroom with good discipline, you won't see the teacher constantly screaming at children. Good teachers almost never scream. They develop a skill for moving around the room and warning students -- with a look or nod or quiet word -- that they should focus on their schoolwork. They don't constantly interrupt the flow of learning to discipline students.

Further, teachers who maintain good discipline come well-prepared to teach. They don't spend class time finding materials, setting up equipment, and getting organized. Disorganized teachers invite misbehavior.

An Attractive Building That Is Well-Maintained. You don't need a shiny modern building for a school to be effective. Many schools with the most modern facilities are failures, and many effective schools operate in ancient buildings. Effective schools make the most of what they have. Even an old school building can be turned into a clean, attractive, cheerful place to learn if the principal and the rest of the staff want to make it happen.

- An effective school should be kept clean.
- Repairs should be made promptly.
- Bathrooms should be clean and supplied with adequate amounts of towels, soap, and toilet paper.
- The building should have sufficient heat in its classrooms, halls, offices, gymnasiums, etc.
- Special purpose facilities, such as libraries and gymnasiums, should be well-organized and in regular use by students, no matter what amount of money is available to operate them.
- Lunches and breakfasts provided by the school should be nutritious and attractive. If you observe in the cafeteria, you should see children eating most food, not throwing it away.

If the school is doing its job, students will cooperate in keeping it clean, and vandalism will be low.

Little Things to Make the School Special. The staff of an effective school does a lot of little things to make the school feel special to children. If you walk into an effective school, you are likely to see attractive displays of student work, bright colors, murals made by students. In the classrooms you are likely to see students' work and projects displayed, rugs and furniture brought in by parents and staff to make the school more homey, special equipment or materials made by the teachers.

No Overcrowding. Each school has an official capacity, a certain number of students that it was designed to hold. An effective school should not exceed this capacity. You should not have students on double shifts, and classes should not be held in gymnasiums, cafeterias, and other rooms that were never supposed to be used as classrooms. In the individual classrooms, you should not find more students enrolled than the school system has agreed to in the contract with the teachers' union.

Ingredient 3
STAFF COMBATS TRUANCY AND DROPOUT

The school makes serious efforts to combat truancy and dropout.

For years, the Chicago Public Schools have concealed the true dropout rate. We now know that in many Chicago high schools, 50% to 60% of students drop out between ninth and twelfth grade. Most students who drop out before finishing high school are illiterate, or close to it.

The student who eventually drops out often has a long history of poor school attendance beginning in elementary school, so that the issues of truancy and dropout are closely tied together.

Students who aren't in school can't learn. Poor school attendance makes it almost impossible for students to learn to read adequately. One researcher found, for example, that black students who missed more than 10 days of school in a year made significantly less progress in reading than students with better attendance records. In the Chicago Public Schools, tens of thousands of students miss more than 20 days of school each year.

Schools with high truancy and dropout rates are likely to blame these problems entirely on someone else: on students, on parents, on the neighborhood. They may tell you -- unofficially -- that they are glad when the "troublemakers" stay away and the classes are smaller, so they can "teach the children who come ready to learn."

The staff of an effective school recognizes that they are responsible for teaching all the children enrolled in their school. They know that the school staff can do a great deal to reduce truancy and dropout.

Accurate Records and Consistent Follow-Up. An effective school keeps accurate records of which students are absent for a

REPORT CARD FOR INGREDIENT 3
Staff Combats Truancy and Dropout

The school has been rated on the following scale:

4 - OUTSTANDING

3 - GOOD

2 - NEEDS IMPROVEMENT

1 - MAJOR DEFICIENCY

RATING

☐ Staff maintains accurate records of attendance in each class, and follows up consistently with absent students and their families.
Comments: _____

☐ The school has an ongoing program for encouraging and awarding good attendance.
Comments: _____

RATING

☐ When students have serious truancy problems, staff takes stock and makes needed changes in a child's educational program.
Comments: _____

☐ School staff seeks help from neighborhood agencies when students don't attend because of personal or family problems.
Comments: _____

☐ Teachers help absent students catch up and make up work easily. Comments: _____

☐ The staff provides special help and counseling services to students who are potential dropouts.
Comments: _____

day or a part of a day. For several years, Chicago schools have been under pressure from the top administration to increase attendance; good schools don't do this by under-reporting student absences. Further, the school's record-keeping should identify those students who are absent frequently. As we explained earlier, these are the ones who are particularly likely to fall behind in reading and eventually to drop out.

The school staff must follow up systematically to inform parents when children are not in school and to find out what is keeping them from attending. In some families just the process of notifying parents that their child has been absent will have a critical impact.

Emphasizing and Rewarding Attendance. Effective schools make children and families aware how important good attendance is. In one effective school in Cincinnati, children and parents were told constantly that the school's number one expectation for children was "Come to school every day and every day on time." One way to emphasize attendance is to establish formal awards and competitions between classrooms. Another is for teachers to tell students informally that they appreciate it when children attend ("Nice to have you back").

A Quality School Program. Not everything in school can be made fun, but an effective school strives to create an interesting program that holds students' attention. Teachers try to find ways to hook a child into learning; if a student is bored, they rethink their teaching methods rather than automatically blaming the child. Good extracurricular activities can play an important part in keeping kids in school; as one writer pointed out, "the youngster who develops even one consuming in-school interest . . . is well on the way to succeeding in other aspects of school."

Diagnose Individual Problems and Take Action. When it is obvious that a student is missing school regularly, the staff must analyze the student's problem and take specific steps to solve it. Simple steps can make a huge difference for a child, but many schools never bother to take a careful look at a student's problems when he begins to miss school.

Parents should be called in, not to be blamed, but to be enlisted as partners in figuring out what is wrong. If the student has a conflict with a teacher or problem with a particular class, a schedule change might help. Although schools should use special education sparingly (as we will discuss later), truant students might need assessment for handicaps. Some truants are having personal problems and can be helped by a school social worker or a sympathetic teacher who is willing to talk. Students who are themselves parents of young children often need a modified schedule so that they can take care of their children, make health clinic appointments, etc.

Of course not all problems students face can be solved by the school's staff. A good school enlists all available community agencies to help remove barriers to school attendance, such as inadequate clothing and food, health problems, drug addiction, emotional problems, and responsibilities for watching brothers and sisters during school time. While some Chicago schools make good use of such community resources, others close themselves off from agencies that could help students with problems that keep them out of school.

Remove Obvious Barriers. When you dig into what's happening in your school, you may discover, to your surprise, that the school itself has set up barriers that limit student attendance. For example, some principals quickly remove truant students from the school roster, so that they can't reenter. Or teachers may refuse to help students make up work they missed when absent, so that the returning student falls further and further behind.

In addition, bad schools push students out through suspension. As we discussed earlier, suspending students cuts them off from the educational program and increases their chances for becoming dropouts. Some Chicago schools still suspend students for being truant, even though this violates the city-wide discipline code. An effective school uses suspension only as a last resort.

Ingredient 4
PARENTS WORK TO IMPROVE THE LEARNING PROGRAM

Parents involve themselves in improving the educational program, and the school welcomes parent participation and responds to parent concerns.

There are some effective schools that have little parent participation. But the evidence indicates that unless parents push to make their schools effective, there will only be a handful of such schools in the city. A few energetic principals or dedicated teachers will buck the system and make their schools work, but most schools will not really change.

As surprising as it may seem, if we are going to have 592 effective schools in Chicago, parents and citizens who care about the schools are going to be the key to making it happen. Parents and citizens who pay the taxes to operate the schools (that $1.7 billion we mentioned earlier) must make sure they are getting their money's worth. The mothers and fathers who bring children into the world, love them, feed them, clothe them, teach them right from wrong, must make sure the school is doing everything it can to give them the education they need for a decent life.

Parent Action That Makes a Difference. How can parents make a real difference in their local school? First, you need to educate yourself about what should be going on in an effective school. Then, you can go beyond just complaining about various things you don't like and work for basic changes that you know will help your children learn better. Second, your parent group has to stay involved and work patiently over a period of months and years. You can't just hold a few big meetings in a crisis and think that you have made any real difference. Third, you must make sure you get accurate information about a problem before taking action. If you base your complaints on rumors or bad information, it will be easy for those who don't want parents involved to discredit you. Fourth, even if your school is generally bad, you must look for good points about it and try to protect any good things that are happening. If a teacher makes a special effort to help students who are behind in reading, that teacher should be praised. If the custodial staff does a good job keeping the school clean, give them some recognition.

If a small group of parents is willing to learn the ingredients of effective schools and to push for them over a period of years, they can be the key to transforming their school into a place where their children really learn. SCHOOLWATCH parent groups have already begun to make that kind of difference in neighborhood schools all around Chicago. They have won new school discipline codes and homework policies. They have convinced principals to review student retention decisions and special education referrals. They have pressured the Board of Education to relieve overcrowding by providing more than $95 million for school construction and renovation in their neighborhoods. They have proved that strong, informed parent action can make a difference.

School Staff Must Support Parent Involvement. While parents must take much of the initiative to form a strong parent group, parents should expect support from the school staff and should object strongly if the staff, and especially the principal, try to smother real parent involvement.

An effective school encourages parents to be involved in many different ways. The staff works closely with parents of individual children, cooperating to solve children's problems and telling parents what they can do at home so that their children will learn better. An effective school has an extensive volunteer program, so that parents can do such things as tutor and make educational materials. Most important, the staff must allow and encourage parents to participate in deciding how the school is run and how it can be improved; they don't try to limit parents to being fund-raisers and boosters with no real say. At one effective school, for instance, parents helped draw up the school's improvement plan, and they review it every year. They look at test scores and other information to check progress in each area of the plan, and they make suggestions for improvement. The principal treats parent councils (for bilingual and Chapter 1 programs) as a help, not a nuisance.

REPORT CARD FOR INGREDIENT 4

Parents Work to Improve the Learning Program

The school has been rated on the following scale:

4 - OUTSTANDING
3 - GOOD
2 - NEEDS IMPROVEMENT
1 - MAJOR DEFICIENCY

RATING

☐ The staff provides accurate understandable information to parents about children's progress. When children have problems, the staff works cooperatively with parents to solve them. Comments:

☐ The school involves parents in a variety of ways, including volunteering. The regular presence of parents in school is seen as normal and helpful. Comments:

☐ School staff help parents to do things at home with their children that will aid their school progress. Comments:

RATING

☐ The principal encourages parents to build a strong independent group that sets its own agenda. He willingly provides them with requested information. Comments:

☐ Parents are involved in deciding how the school is run. When parents make recommendations, real changes occur as a result. Comments:

☐ Parents are well-informed about how an effective school should work and obtain accurate information before taking action. Comments:

☐ Parents stay involved consistently, not just in a crisis. Comments:

☐ Parents identify and protect their school's strengths, as well as pressing for improvements in weaknesses. Comments:

In an effective school, the staff allows parents to build a strong parent group that sets its own agenda; the principal does not try to control and manipulate the parent group. When parents ask a question or request written information (like the school's budget), the school staff supplies it willingly. The staff answers questions in a clear simple language that parents can understand. If parents speak a language other than English, the staff provides information in the parents' native language.

The final test of the school's sincerity in encouraging parent involvement is whether they make real changes when parents raise problems or make recommendations. If parents object that the playground is not being properly supervised or that the school lacks a clear policy about assigning homework, the principal of an effective school will make some real changes as a result. If your local parent group decides to investigate how effective your school is, you will very quickly find out whether the principal and teachers have a commitment to real parent involvement.

In schools where parents are really accepted as partners by the staff, many parents are in the school every day for a variety of reasons. The staff sees the day-to-day presence of parents as normal and helpful, not a threat.

Ingredient 5
STAFF BELIEVES STUDENTS CAN LEARN

The principal and the teachers firmly believe that their students can learn as well as anybody, and they work hard to make that happen.

If you spend time in an effective school, one of the most striking things you will observe is the optimistic way that the staff talks about students and how much they expect students to accomplish. If you sit in the teachers' room of such an effective school, you will hear teachers discussing various ways they are trying to get children to learn a specific skill, not complaining about all the reasons that "these children" can't learn. In an effective school, the staff has high expectations, both for what they can teach children and for what their children can learn.

Unfortunately, in the typical Chicago school, many teachers don't believe that their students can accomplish very much. If you observe the classes, you get the feeling that people are just going through the motions. Children quickly pick up this message. They begin to think they are stupid, and they don't try very hard either. It is a vicious circle.

Principal Sets the Tone. The principal sets the tone in determining how much the staff expects from children. A good principal is constantly telling his staff that the children in this school can learn, and that it is the staff's job to find the way to help each child learn. Good principals won't accept no for an answer. They won't tolerate talk about all the reasons that poor kids, black kids, Hispanic kids, kids from a certain neighborhood, kids from a certain family, can't learn.

The principal who really believes in the abilities of his students translates this optimism into plans for improving the school, into visits to classrooms to help teachers, into developing a good discipline code and carrying it out. A bad principal instead offers dozens of excuses and rationalizations about why he can't accomplish very much.

Expectations in the Classroom. In an effective school, teachers swing into action when a child has a problem. They try different approaches to teaching a particular skill and talk with each other about what might work. The principal or a resource teacher comes in to help. People try to solve the problem while keeping the child in the regular classroom, rather than immediately referring the child to a special class.

Teacher expectations for children also come out minute by minute as they teach their classes. Do teachers really expect children to do the classwork thoroughly, or is it enough if they keep quiet and look busy? How does the teacher respond when a child has failed to complete an assignment? What does the teacher do when a child makes a mistake? A teacher with good intentions but who doesn't

REPORT CARD FOR INGREDIENT 5
Staff Believes Students Can Learn

The school has been rated on the following scale:

4 - OUTSTANDING

3 - GOOD

2 - NEEDS IMPROVEMENT

1 - MAJOR DEFICIENCY

RATING

☐ Staff believes that all children can learn and that it is in their power to teach children basic skills effectively. Comments:

☐ Staff doesn't make negative comments about groups of children – poor children, children from certain neighborhoods, etc. Comments:

☐ Staff does not manipulate standardized test scores to make them look better. Comments:

RATING

☐ Staff has an overall plan for helping a child with problems. This plan focuses on helping the child in the regular classroom. Comments:

☐ The school does not rigidly divide students into separate "ability" groups. Comments:

☐ Teachers focus attention on all students, not just a few. Teachers often praise children, especially for specific things they do well. Comments:

☐ By school-wide policy, homework is consistently assigned and corrected. Comments:

☐ The school has several well-established ways to recognize students' accomplishments and progress. Many students are recognized, not just a few. Comments:

really expect a child to succeed may say "nice try, good idea," even when the child gives the wrong answer. The child gets the message that poor performance is OK, that he's not really expected to do more. Teachers who expect more from children are likely to say "I know you can do better than that." One researcher found that teachers will wait longer for an answer if they expect a child to respond correctly. When they think the child won't know the answer, they'll interrupt quickly and move on -- and the children get the message that they are not really expected to succeed.

Homework Is Taken Seriously. Students do better in schools that assign homework regularly than in those that don't. And students do best in schools that not only assign homework regularly, but correct it and go over it with students. A good school principal should enforce a clear policy that homework is regularly assigned and corrected. When teachers take students' homework seriously, this not only increases their chance to learn, but it also sends them a message that teachers expect children to work hard on their own. In one effective schools study, whether homework was regularly assigned and corrected was one of the most powerful indicators of how well students were learning to read.

There are several issues to keep in mind in setting up a good homework policy. First, homework should be tied in a thoughtful way to the teacher's learning objectives and not just be mindless drudgery. Second, the nature and amount of homework should vary according to the child's age and level of development.

The School Honors Student Accomplishments. Good schools call attention to students whenever they do good work. They display students' work in halls and classrooms. Teachers praise students who do things well. Assemblies and other ceremonies honor student accomplishments. Certificates, ribbons, and plaques are frequently given out. And these honors are not just focused on a select few; a high percentage of students get recognition for the good things they accomplish, both in their schoolwork and in other school activities.

Ingredient 6
LEARNING TO READ IS THE FIRST PRIORITY

The school staff defines learning to read in its broadest sense as the school's first priority, and uses all school subjects and resources to make sure that this happens.

People who accomplish things in life set priorities and follow through on them. Good schools do the same thing. In good urban schools, learning to read is the first priority. The principal, the teachers, and everyone else in the school do everything in their power to make sure that everybody learns to read.

In Chapter 2, we discussed what it means to learn to read well -- well enough to get a good job when you finish school. And we said that learning to read well means more than just sounding out the words in a sentence or checking off skills on a chart. It means understanding what you read. It means drawing conclusions from what you read. It means enjoying what you read so you will read a lot on your own.

Effective schools, in other words, understand that learning to read well is a complex process that involves every part of the school's program. Ineffective schools limit themselves with the narrow, over-simplified idea that reading is a skill that children learn through doing reading exercises.

Four Critical Learning Experiences. Schools in Pennsylvania have recently adopted guidelines for reading instruction that are based on a broad understanding of what it means to learn to read. After reviewing research about reading instruction, they have identified "four critical experiences" that should be taking place regularly in the classroom if children are going to learn to read well. In an effective school, parents should see their children participating in these four types of learning experiences daily:

1. Listening to and reacting to stories, poems, and other literature. Teachers read to children, or have children read, stories, poems, plays, fairy tales, adventures, biographies. They give children many

REPORT CARD FOR INGREDIENT 6

Learning to Read Is the First Priority

The school has been rated on the following scale:

4 - OUTSTANDING

3 - GOOD

2 - NEEDS IMPROVEMENT

1 - MAJOR DEFICIENCY

RATING

☐ The principal's first priority is teaching children to read, and evidence of this commitment is everywhere in the school.
Comments: _____

_____

☐ The school's program emphasizes four critical activities daily: (1) listening to and discussing stories, poems, and other literature, (2) reading silently from materials children select themselves, (3) composing in writing, and (4) learning language patterns, including phonics and spelling. Comments: _____

_____

RATING

☐ Reading activities constantly emphasize understanding the meaning of material, not learning isolated skills.
Comments: _____

_____

☐ School and classroom libraries make a variety of reading materials available, and they are in constant heavy use. Comments: _____

_____

☐ Teachers carefully teach reading through such subjects as social studies, science, and arithmetic. Comments: _____

_____

☐ When a child has trouble learning to read, teachers try various approaches until they find one that works. Comments: _____

_____

different opportunities to react to this literature. Children discuss whether they like it. They answer questions about what happened and why. They write about it, act it out, draw pictures about it. This kind of experience is vital in engaging children in the process of reading. It teaches children from the beginning that books can tell you about exciting things, things you care about.

2. Reading silently from materials that children select themselves. The school offers children the broadest possible collection of things to read -- adventure books, fairy tales, biographies, science books, magazines, newspapers. This assortment includes books about people from varied cultures and books in children's native languages. These materials are available both in the school library and the classroom library, and they are in constant heavy use by children. At a regular time each day, kids are allowed to pick out their own materials and read them -- in school, without interruption, at their own pace and in their own way, without any required reports or formal tests. When children choose their own books, they develop their own interest in reading. When they have a daily chance to read, they're practicing reading skills naturally.

3. Composing in writing. Children are encouraged to make up stories, out of their own experience or imagination, and to write them down (or have the teacher write them down). Children write sentences and paragraphs in response to materials they read or have read to them. Children work together to write a short story or short play. When children write or see their own words written down, they are more likely to understand the connection between spoken words and written words, and between the way words are said and the way they are spelled. Writing, then, is not just an important skill for its own sake; writing is one critical experience for learning to read.

4. Learning about language patterns, including phonics, spelling, and grammar. This is what comes to most people's minds when they think about learning to read: understanding the relation between letters and sounds, examining how sentences are put together, learning to spell words. This is a crucial part of reading instruction that should not be neglected. But it is only one of the four parts of a good reading program.

A School That Reads. If you visit a school that teaches children to read well, you will see all of these activities going on every day. And if you do, you will see a school bursting at the seams with books and with kids who are reading, a school saturated with a concern about reading. You will see "a school that reads."

As we've said before, the leadership of the principal is critical in creating a school that reads. The principal in a school that reads won't tell you that she trusts her teachers to do the right things in teaching children to read. She will be out in the classrooms making sure that the activities described above are going on every day. And she won't be satisfied with a "reading program" that consists merely of drilling children to teach them the sounds of letters, like Chicago's Mastery Learning Reading program.

In an effective school, the principal will insist that all teachers who are trying to teach the same child to read coordinate their efforts. For example, the learning disabilities teacher and the regular classroom teacher should meet regularly to plan reading instruction for the children they both work with.

In an effective school, the principal will insist that every teacher is a reading teacher. When a teacher teaches arithmetic or social studies, he will make reading instruction a conscious part of the lesson, and he will be aware of the reading levels and reading problems of children in his class. He won't say that his job is to teach fractions, and it is someone else's job to teach children to read.

When a child is having trouble learning to read, a good school will have a careful procedure for focusing attention on that child and for figuring out how to help her. The principal or other resource people will come into the classroom to help determine what the problem is. The staff will try different approaches to find one that works for that child. And they will try to solve the problem in the regular classroom, and not automatically send the child to a special class, so that "someone else" can solve the child's reading problem.

Bridges Between Reading at Home and Reading at School. An effective school will form a partnership with parents, so that reading is encouraged at home as well as in school. Effective urban schools

take practical steps to encourage parents to read to their children, to talk with them about movies or TV programs, to go over their homework with them, to play word games, to visit the library. They earn parents' trust, so that parents will listen to specific advice about the dozens of things they can do at home to help children learn to read -- even if the parents themselves have some reading difficulties.

Another way that an effective school builds this bridge is to have parents volunteer in the classroom. Parents can help teachers and children carry out the four kinds of learning activities we described above. And when they help in the classroom, they can pick up ideas about what they can do at home to help their children succeed.

Ingredient 7
STUDENT TIME IS SPENT MOSTLY ON LEARNING ACTIVITIES

School schedules and day-to-day practices of all school staff help children spend as much time as possible actively involved in learning activities.

Children spend between 15,000 and 20,000 hours in school by the time they graduate from high school. But they don't spend all of it learning. Researchers observing different urban schools have found vast differences in the amount of time that students spend actively involved in learning. For example, in classrooms where students make good progress, students spend 80% to 90% of class time actively working on educational tasks. However, in bad classrooms, the amount of time spent on learning is frequently 30% or less. And researchers have proven what you might expect from common sense: the more time students spend on learning activities that are at the right level for them, the more they learn.

There are several steps that the principal and the teachers can take to increase the amount of time students spend on appropriate learning activities, and parents should expect to see these steps being taken in their school.

School Schedules Set Aside Time for Reading. In most schools, either individual teachers or the staff as a whole develop a schedule that sets aside time for teaching different subjects. In schools with higher reading scores, the staff devotes a substantial amount of time to the four critical experiences in learning to read that were described above. If a school staff really places a priority on teaching children to read, they will set aside about 90 to 150 minutes of the school day for teaching these critical experiences, depending on the grade level. And the principal won't leave this scheduling process completely to the individual teachers; either the principal will establish a school-wide schedule or she will set up some guidelines for individual teachers' schedules.

But scheduling doesn't tell the whole story. You have to dig deeper to find out whether students actually spend the time that has been set aside for reading instruction in a productive way.

Teachers Maximize Learning Time. Two classes can each devote 90 minutes to reading instruction, but when you watch what the teachers and children are actually doing during that 90 minutes, you come up with very different pictures. In an effective classroom, the teacher is presenting the lesson, asking and answering questions, giving directions, monitoring classwork. Most of the children, most of the time, are listening to the teacher, asking and answering questions, doing assignments. Then, the amount of time actually spent in teaching and learning can approach 80% to 90% of the time scheduled.

Other classrooms, by contrast, spend very little of the scheduled time actually engaged in instruction. Instead, teachers are grading homework, or looking for supplies, or coping with discipline problems. Children are assigned seatwork, with little instruction or feedback. Many become bored and restless, and they misbehave. In one urban classroom, researchers watched the teacher spend the entire afternoon trying to maintain order; no teaching took place at all.

REPORT CARD FOR INGREDIENT 7

Student Time Is Spent Mostly on Learning Activities

The school has been rated on the following scale:

4 - OUTSTANDING

3 - GOOD

2 - NEEDS IMPROVEMENT

1 - MAJOR DEFICIENCY

RATING

☐ School schedules set aside substantial time for academics, especially for instruction in reading and math. Comments:

☐ Teachers organize lessons and arrange materials beforehand, so that class time is devoted mainly to active instruction. Comments:

RATING

☐ Teachers spend most class time actively teaching and questioning the whole class or groups of students, keeping children actively engaged in learning. Comments:

☐ Teachers set learning tasks that are appropriate for individual children. Comments:

☐ The principal filters out outside interruptions in class time set aside for academic learning activities. Comments:

☐ The principal works to minimize teacher absence and transfer, and carefully coordinates the activities of substitute teachers. Comments:

Teachers Must Be Prepared. An effective teacher organizes lessons and grades homework before or after class, so that time in the classroom is left free for instruction. Work is ready for the children to start as soon as they arrive, before they have a chance to get into trouble. Books and lesson materials are already set up or ready for distribution, so the children don't spend time waiting. And the teacher knows how to help children make the transition from one activity to another quickly and efficiently, so that the first twenty minutes of reading time aren't wasted in putting away math books and rearranging furniture.

An Active Teaching Style. Effective teachers have an active teaching style. They spend much of their time in give-and-take with the whole class or with small groups of children. They move around the room, making a special effort to keep all students alert and interested. They watch which children are beginning to wander and pull them back into the group activity. But they avoid concentrating on one or two very bright -- or very slow -- children while the rest of the class loses interest. They develop what one researcher called "with-it-ness": the ability to keep in touch with everything that's happening in the classroom while still going on with teaching. When they assign classwork, they go around the room examining children's progress and reteaching where necessary, rather than disappearing behind their desks to do paperwork. They assume responsibility for keeping the children engaged in the learning task at hand.

Ineffective teachers have a passive approach to teaching. They pass out worksheets and gather them up, but they really don't do much teaching. They don't spend enough time in active give-and-take with their students. They waste valuable class time on activities that should be done outside of class -- grading papers, planning lessons, filling out forms.

As we mentioned earlier in discussing student discipline, a critical part of an active teaching style is to maintain good classroom discipline without stopping the process of teaching. Every time a teacher stops the class to scold a child, everyone in the class loses learning time. Effective teachers maintain control of the class with a look or a gesture without interrupting the flow. Good planning keeps the pace of instruction fast, and avoids creating "downtime" where problems develop. Effective teachers make their behavior rules clear from the first day and enforce them consistently, so many behavior problems are avoided.

Learning Tasks Must Be Appropriate. The research about time spent on learning indicates that it doesn't help a student to spend more time on learning activities if these activities aren't right for the child. If the tasks are too easy or too hard, the student will not learn. If a student is merely asked to repeat exercises which he has failed to understand before -- without a new teaching approach or some additional help -- more time on these tasks won't result in more learning.

Earlier in the chapter, we described the four experiences that are critical for teaching children to read. A student's program in reading is not appropriate unless it includes all four. An effective school must spend time on all of them. Children won't learn to read well if the school is spending 90% of the time drilling students on phonics or spelling words.

Time alone is not enough -- the time must be spent on activities that mesh with what students need. So don't be impressed if your principal shows you a time schedule with "reading" written all over it, or you see students spending hours filling out reading worksheets. You have to dig deeper than that.

Principal Filters Out Distractions. Good classroom organization, intelligent selection of learning activities, and an active teaching style are most critical in ensuring that students use their learning time effectively. But school-wide plans for filtering out classroom interruptions can affect learning time as well. An effective principal recognizes that class time is precious and protects this precious time. Special instruction, such as Chapter 1, special education, or instrumental music, is scheduled so that it won't interrupt academic instruction in the regular classroom. The same goes for fire drills and assemblies. Messages are left in teachers' mailboxes instead of being delivered to classrooms or announced over the p.a. system. When principals or others visit the classroom, they take care not to disrupt what is going on.

In one effective school, the time from 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. is set aside as "sacred time" for teaching reading, and there are absolutely no interruptions or children out of class for special activities during that time.

Absence and Transfer. The research on learning time shows that the time students spend on learning declines dramatically when the regular teacher is absent or when one teacher is transferred and a new teacher must come into the classroom. In effective schools, the principal and staff strive for high staff attendance, so that the disruptive effects of absence will be minimized. When a teacher is absent, the school has clear procedures for leaving lesson plans and for introducing the substitute to the children.

Similarly, an effective school -- with leadership from the principal -- fights to keep its staff stable, so that constant teacher turnover doesn't rob students of learning time.

Student learning time is of course cut dramatically when students themselves are frequently absent from school. As we explained above, effective schools have high rates of student attendance.

Ingredient 8
FREQUENT CHECKS OF STUDENT PROGRESS

The principal and teachers check frequently to see how well children are learning, and use this information to make the educational program more effective.

You can't make a great meal just by throwing things in a pot and hoping for the best. As any good cook knows, you need to keep checking the dish to see how it's going. Bubbling too fast? Turn down the heat. Too thick? Add water. Taste bland? Add seasoning.

The process of testing and adjusting and testing again is just as important in the complicated process of teaching children to read as it is in cooking a meal that turns out right. An effective school, as we've said earlier, must have a clear plan for teaching children to read, and the staff must make a serious daily effort to carry out the plan. Then there must be frequent checks on how things are going, and this checking process must lead to adjustments along the way.

If you ask your principal whether the school staff checks students' progress, he will undoubtedly show you a mountain of checklists, test forms, and test results. But you have to dig deeper. Are teachers collecting information about students that is really useful to them in planning what to do next? Or are they forced to do reams of testing and record-keeping that is never looked at again? Are the city-wide achievement tests given honestly, so that you can have some confidence in the accuracy of the results? Do the results arrive in time to be used? Are the city-wide results actually used in planning to improve the school program?

Daily and Weekly Checks of Student Progress. Effective teachers check how well students are learning all the time, using many different kinds of evidence. They listen to the answers students give in class to judge what they don't understand. When teachers assign classwork, they go around the room looking at children's papers, and stop to reteach when something doesn't seem to be getting across. They use homework to check on student learning, and they are careful to grade and return it so that kids get feedback. They give frequent quizzes, written and oral. They don't rely on infrequent, formal tests that tell them too late where they have failed; they use regular observations and notes about individual children to identify problems early, so that they can keep trying for success.

Through this constant checking process, good teachers find out which lessons are getting across and which aren't. Which methods work, and which don't. Which children are learning well, and which are falling behind. They then reteach lessons, change methods, try new materials, give special help to children who need help, encourage those who are doing well.

Gathering this information not only helps teachers make better decisions. It also allows teachers to give feedback to students. One researcher found that a crucial difference between effective and

REPORT CARD FOR INGREDIENT 8

Frequent Checks of Student Progress

The school has been rated on the following scale:

4 - OUTSTANDING

3 - GOOD

2 - NEEDS IMPROVEMENT

1 - MAJOR DEFICIENCY

RATING

☐ Teachers use a variety of formal and informal methods to frequently check students' progress. Comments:

☐ Teachers constantly use this information to guide them in reteaching, regrouping, giving extra help, trying a new method. Comments:

RATING

☐ Staff administers standardized tests according to accepted practice. Excessive coaching is not employed. Comments:

☐ Staff uses the results of standardized tests -- along with other information -- to modify the school's learning program and the programs of individual students. Comments:

☐ Information about student progress is communicated to parents in a way they can understand. Comments:

ineffective schools was that the effective schools let children know about their successes and failures, so that students could respond by eliminating mistakes.

Principal Checks School Progress. Just as a good teacher is constantly checking the progress of students in a variety of ways, a good principal is constantly pulling together information about progress in the school as a whole. A good principal knows first-hand what is going on in each classroom, since he spends a substantial amount of time there. Many principals require and review regular reports from teachers about the progress of each student. They then use this data to identify students and teachers who need help.

Fair Administration and Use of Standardized Tests. In Chapter 2, we explained that test results from the City-Wide Testing Program can be useful -- provided that children are not receiving excessive coaching to prepare them for the tests and that various forms of outright cheating on the part of principals and teachers is not going on. An effective school does not engage in these deceptive practices. If the school staff sees the city-wide tests as something to be manipulated, test results can hardly provide them with useful information for improving the school.

If city-wide tests are properly given, the results can be one useful source of information for developing an overall picture of how well the school is doing in teaching basic skills. They can show at what grade level students are falling behind. If the tests show that a teacher's class has made poor progress, that can be a sign that the teacher needs extra help. And a student's individual score (combined with other information about the student) can suggest where the student is strong and weak.

Informing Parents of Student and School Progress. As discussed earlier, parents have a right to accurate information about their child's progress. If a child is having trouble, parents need clear evidence about the child's problems, so that they can participate in deciding what needs to be done and so they can help their child at home.

And parent groups also have a right to information about the school's test results, explained in terms they can understand. If parents' primary language is not English, test information should be explained in their primary language.

Ingredient 9
STAFF DEVELOPMENT IS TIED TO SPECIFIC SCHOOL GOALS

Staff development programs help teachers achieve the priority educational goals for the school.

Because the enrollment of the Chicago Public Schools is shrinking, few new teachers are hired each year. If your school is going to improve, teachers already working at the school will have to change how they do things. They will need to learn new skills and break old habits. They will have to learn to work closely together, when they have been used to working alone. These major changes will require a great deal of training and help for the school's staff.

This type of teacher training is often called staff development. Designs for Change has studied staff development in a number of large school systems across the country, and has identified what makes staff development effective in helping a school improve. This research also shows why most staff development doesn't work and costs a lot of money, even though no one is satisfied with it.

Most large school districts like Chicago have dozens of disconnected activities going on that are supposed to help teachers do a better job. Teachers take courses at universities, and get salary increases as a result. Specialists in different areas, like reading instruction or race relations, come from downtown to hold workshops. Principals are responsible for staff development meetings at their local school, but some don't take the responsibility very seriously. Most teachers complain that staff development activities are boring and of little use.

REPORT CARD FOR INGREDIENT 9

Staff Development Is Tied to Specific School Goals

The school has been rated on the following scale:

4 - OUTSTANDING

3 - GOOD

2 - NEEDS IMPROVEMENT

1 - MAJOR DEFICIENCY

RATING

☐ Staff development is focused on needed skills and knowledge for carrying out the school's improvement plan. Comments:

RATING

☐ The principal provides leadership for creating this coherent staff development program. Comments:

☐ Staff have a significant role in deciding the focus of staff development experiences and their specifics. Comments:

☐ Staff development takes place in varied ways, including supervision, workshops, meetings to share ideas, and visits to other schools. Comments:

Staff Development Must Focus on Making Your School Effective. If your school is going to provide really useful training and assistance for teachers in all this confusion, its staff development program must have a clear focus. Your school's staff development program must give the principal, the teachers, and other school staff the knowledge and skills they most need to make your school effective, with all the ingredients of an effective school described in this chapter. To do so, this program must be based on a specific analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of your particular school; it must be tied closely to the school improvement plan that we described earlier.

For example, teachers may need training about how to maintain classroom discipline, set up a program for sustained silent rea[illegible] by students, or use test information in designing student learni[illegible] experiences. Staff development should be centered on teaching the skills and knowledge that are most needed in your local school.

The Principal Must Take Leadership, But Involve Others Too. Once again, strong leadership from the principal is essential. The principal is the only person who can provide the leadership to develop a clear plan for improving the school and make staff development consistent with this plan. It is very hard in Chicago to put together the people, time, and money needed for staff development. Schedules must be arranged. Often, teachers must agree to participate voluntarily. Good workshop leaders must be found. Without the principal taking the lead, plans for staff training fall apart.

Although the principal must take the leadership, teachers, teacher aides, counselors, security guards, and others who need new skills must have some voice in setting up a staff development program if it is going to work. They must help decide what their needs are, and what training experiences would help them meet their needs. When people have a role in shaping their training experiences, they are more likely to participate enthusiastically -- and to change as a result. Finally, parents should have some voice in setting staff development priorities, as part of their overall participation in improving the school.

Varied Formats for Staff Development. People learn new skills in many different ways. They can learn when someone observes them teaching and gives them advice. They can learn from workshops. They can learn from sharing ideas and experiences with other teachers. They can learn from visiting other schools. A good staff development program will use all these different approaches to teaching people -- and not only rely on workshops or lectures.

Ingredient 10
SPECIAL PROGRAMS ARE CAREFULLY DESIGNED

Special programs (bilingual education, special education, Chapter 1, and so on) are of high quality, are carefully matched to student needs, and are coordinated closely with the overall learning program of the school.

Fifteen years ago, many children who needed special help in school got none at all. Handicapped children were often excluded entirely from school. Children whose native language was not English were expected to sink or swim in all-English classes, and a high percentage dropped out. Since then, there has been major progress in providing special help for children who need it to succeed in school:

- Illinois law requires that any school with more than twenty children who speak a language other than English must teach school subjects in that language and meanwhile help children learn English.
- Federal and state laws require schools to provide special education programs for handicapped children who are "mentally retarded, hard of hearing, deaf, speech impaired, visually handicapped, seriously emotionally disturbed, orthopedically impaired, other health impaired, deaf-blind, multi-handicapped, or [have] specific learning disabilities."

REPORT CARD FOR INGREDIENT 10

Special Programs Are Carefully Designed

The school has been rated on the following scale:

4 - OUTSTANDING
3 - GOOD
2 - NEEDS IMPROVEMENT
1 - MAJOR DEFICIENCY

RATING

☐ Because most children are taught in regular classrooms, referral for special programs is careful and limited. Comments: _____

☐ When children have problems, the child's regular classroom situation is studied, and help is provided to teacher and child to keep the child in the regular classroom. Comments: _____

☐ Staff makes careful evaluations of any child referred for special programs, using many kinds of evidence (test results, classroom observations, parent comments) about the child. Comments: _____

RATING

☐ Staff fights for the best special placement for a child who needs one, one that allows the maximum amount of participation in the regular classroom. Comments: _____

☐ Special programs have qualified teachers who use the same practices for effective teaching desirable in the regular classroom. Comments: _____

☐ The principal monitors special programs and insists on close coordination between regular class and special class teachers. Comments: _____

☐ The objective of special programs is to return children to the regular classroom. Careful transition services help children move back to the regular class when they are ready. Comments: _____

☐ Parents are given the information and the opportunity to participate fully when children are referred for, evaluated for, or placed in special programs. Comments: _____

■ Federal law prohibits discrimination based on sex, forbidding such practices as excluding pregnant students from school and maintaining separate vocational education programs for males and females.

■ A federal law (Chapter 1) and a similar state law provide extra money for schools with large numbers of low-income children so they can give special help to those who are behind in learning basic skills.

If these programs are run properly, they can be of enormous benefit to children. But providing special help has some major dangers. When special programs exist, some teachers are tempted to use them to get rid of students with minor learning problems or behavior problems who could succeed in the regular program. Another serious problem is that there is frequently nothing "special" about special classes. Often special class teachers believe that their children can accomplish little, and they don't try very hard to teach them. These children soon get the message and begin to see themselves as stupid.

An effective school avoids these problems. When children need special help, the programs are of high quality, are carefully matched to student needs, and are coordinated closely with the overall learning program of the school.

Most Children Are Taught in the Regular Classroom. As we discussed earlier, teachers in an effective school believe they can teach almost all children in the regular classroom, and they keep trying different approaches until they succeed. They are reluctant to refer a child for a special program unless there is clear evidence that the child needs this help. One effective Michigan school, mentioned earlier, has no remedial programs at all, because they place such a strong emphasis on helping children succeed in the regular classroom. Bad schools, in contrast, refer large numbers of children for special programs, quickly passing the buck to someone else even for minor problems.

When a teacher does refer a child for special help, effective schools check first to see if the problem can be solved in the regular classroom. In one effective school we studied, the principal has set up a procedure that should be used in every school. A school-level committee -- consisting of the principal, some special staff, and several experienced teachers -- reviews each case, meets with the child's regular classroom teacher, observes the child in class, and tries to develop ways to deal with the child's problem in the regular classroom. The child's parents are asked to participate to see what insights they have. Only if this process fails is the child evaluated for special programs.

Careful Assessment and Placement. Once a child is referred for special help, the staff of an effective school makes sure that a careful evaluation is done. This evaluation should draw on test results, reports from teachers, observations in the regular classroom, and parents' information and ideas to provide detailed information about the child's strengths and weaknesses.

Once the evaluation is completed, an effective school makes a careful decision about whether the child actually needs special help that can't be provided by the regular classroom teacher, and, if so, what kind of special help the child needs. The staff must then be willing to fight for the right program for the child. One barrier children often face in getting the right help is that there may not be an opening in the type of class or service that the child needs. There will then be a temptation to decide that the child really doesn't need special help after all, or to put the child in whatever special program is available -- with the idea that some form of special attention is better than nothing. Many children's lives have been ruined by such compromises. An effective school does not allow such damaging student misclassification.

One critical aspect of the decision about placing a child is to find a placement that allows him to spend as much time as possible in the regular classroom. Totally separate special classes or schools are especially likely to become dumping grounds for students with problems, which in fact do little to help them. The best place for a child to receive special help is right in the regular classroom; many effective schools require that special teachers almost always work with children in the regular class, rather than pulling them out. The next best approach to providing special help is through a part-time program that still allows the child to spend most of his time with the

regular class. Only children with serious problems should be placed in separate special classes or schools. In Chicago, many children are placed in classes that unnecessarily separate them from the regular program, because there are not enough part-time classes. An effective school will serve as many students as possible by giving part-time special help.

High Quality Special Programs. Special programs in effective schools are adequately staffed by teachers and other educators thoroughly trained to provide a particular special service. Furthermore, these special teachers are allowed to do the job they are being paid to do; the principal does not divert them to other activities, such as covering classes for absent teachers.

Teachers in special programs should base their teaching on accepted professional practices in their field. (We cannot discuss in great detail what these practices should be, but if you have a particular interest in such an area, contact SCHOOLWATCH for more information.) In general, teachers in special programs should use the same effective practices that good regular classroom teachers use. Effective teachers should, for example, hold high expectations for students, make a wide variety of reading materials available to students, prepare carefully for classes, maintain effective discipline, and check student progress frequently. If you do not see evidence of such good, consistent teaching in the special classes in your school, you should be concerned that these classes are a dumping ground where little real learning is going on.

Finally, a good special program should be giving children the skills and knowledge they need to return to the regular program. Teachers should know the child's strengths and weaknesses specifically, and they should have a plan for overcoming weaknesses and moving the child back to the regular classroom. In bad programs, no such commitment will be evident; teachers talking about their students will indicate that they expect them to stay in special programs permanently.

Principal Monitors Special Classes. Placement decisions and learning programs for special classes are often partly under the control of supervisors from district offices or downtown. However, as we discussed earlier, an effective principal must take responsibility to coordinate the work of every person who works in her school. An effective principal understands what is supposed to be happening in good special classes, visits them regularly, and holds special class teachers responsible for their performance. A good principal doesn't assume that "someone else" is supervising what goes on in bilingual education classes, special education classes, or Chapter 1 classes.

One issue that a good principal gives special attention to is coordination between special programs and the regular program. For children who spend part-time in the regular program and part-time in a special program, it is critical that the teachers involved meet regularly and plan together. Surprisingly, research indicates that this planning often doesn't happen. The result is that a child with a reading problem may have to cope with two completely different systems for teaching reading, and may have to learn twice as many new words each week as a child who doesn't have reading problems. The principal must make sure that such foul-ups don't happen.

A good principal must also insure a successful transition back into the regular classroom for children who are returning there from special programs. This coordination often doesn't take place unless the principal insists that special program teachers and regular program teachers plan this transition. The child will often need extra help in getting started in the regular classroom, and the principal must make sure that this help is provided.

Parents Are Full Partners. When a child has a special learning need that might require extra help, parents should be brought in at the beginning and should be full partners in all decisions. If the child is having trouble in the regular class, parents should be asked to help decide how the problem might be solved and what they can do

at home. If the school recommends a special evaluation, parents should be told about the advantages and disadvantages of special programs, and should take part in placement decisions. If their child is placed in a special program, parents should be informed of progress and problems and, once again, asked for their views and their help at home.

In effective schools, staff members recognize the importance of making parents full partners in such critical decisions. They know that parents may be hesitant to get involved or to state their ideas, and so the staff takes special care to encourage parents and give full clear explanations. In bad schools, these practices are not followed. Parents are urged simply to "sign off," so that evaluation and placement can proceed. Staff members make decisions beforehand and then press parents to agree. The possible dangers of special program placement are not discussed.

YOU CAN MAKE THE DIFFERENCE

These then are ten key ingredients that can make your school an effective one -- a school where most children learn to read. Although they may sound like simple common sense, you won't often find them in most Chicago schools. But they could be there. If you are willing to put in some time for your children -- the way parents in other SCHOOLWATCH groups are doing for theirs -- you can push your school to become effective. And although our schools need more money, many of the changes that we've described won't cost a lot extra; there is no reason why they can't be started right away, using the $1.7 billion of our money that the school system already has. In Chapter 5, we talk more about what concerned parents and citizens can do to make each local school a good one.

CHAPTER 4

What About the Bureaucracy?

SCHOOLWATCH places . . .

. . . its first and primary emphasis on changing what happens in each local school. The Chicago Board of Education has a long history of adopting new programs and policies at the top that do not result in any real improvements in children's learning experiences at the school level. That is why we recommend that you put most of your energies into finding out what's happening in your local school and then insisting on changes there. Once you are clear about what needs to be done in your local school, you can get a great deal accomplished within its four walls. Working with your school's principal and teachers, for instance, you can see that a meaningful school improvement plan or a discipline code or a homework policy is adopted and carried out. Don't accept the excuse that "the people downtown" won't let your school do something. There are many committed teachers and principals who get changes made in spite of "downtown."

However, once you are clear about what changes are needed in your school, you will also find that the school system's bureaucracy puts some real barriers in your way, and that these barriers need to be removed if your school is going to become an effective one. In February 1985, Designs for Change released a report (called *The Bottom Line: Chicago's Failing Schools and How to Save Them*) that describes many of the broader changes in the school system's bureaucracy that are needed so that local schools can become more effective. For example, *The Bottom Line* recommends that the school system's top leadership take strong steps to eliminate coaching and cheating on reading achievement tests; eliminating the irregularities in testing described in Chapter 2 can restore public confidence in the accuracy of these critical test results.

To accomplish the maximum in changing your local school, you must learn more about the school system's bureaucracy, figure out how the bureaucracy needs to change so that your local school can improve, and then fight for the changes that are needed.

On the next page is a simplified diagram of the organization of the school system. Here are a few of the most basic features of this bureaucracy that you should keep in mind:

- The eleven members of the Board of Education have the legal responsibility for running the school system. They are appointed by the Mayor of Chicago and must be approved by the City Council. The board members are <u>your</u> representatives; don't be shy about getting in touch with them.

- The General Superintendent of Schools is the most powerful single person in the system, with responsibilities for recommending changes in policy, managing the system, recommending people for jobs throughout the system.

- The Deputy Superintendent of Schools is responsible for the day-to-day operation of <u>all local schools</u> and for the Department of School Support, which handles construction, maintenance, food services, pupil transportation, and school security.

- Reporting to the Deputy Superintendent of Schools are three Field Superintendents. One of these Field Superintendents is responsible for all high schools. The other two Field Superintendents are each responsible for half the elementary schools.

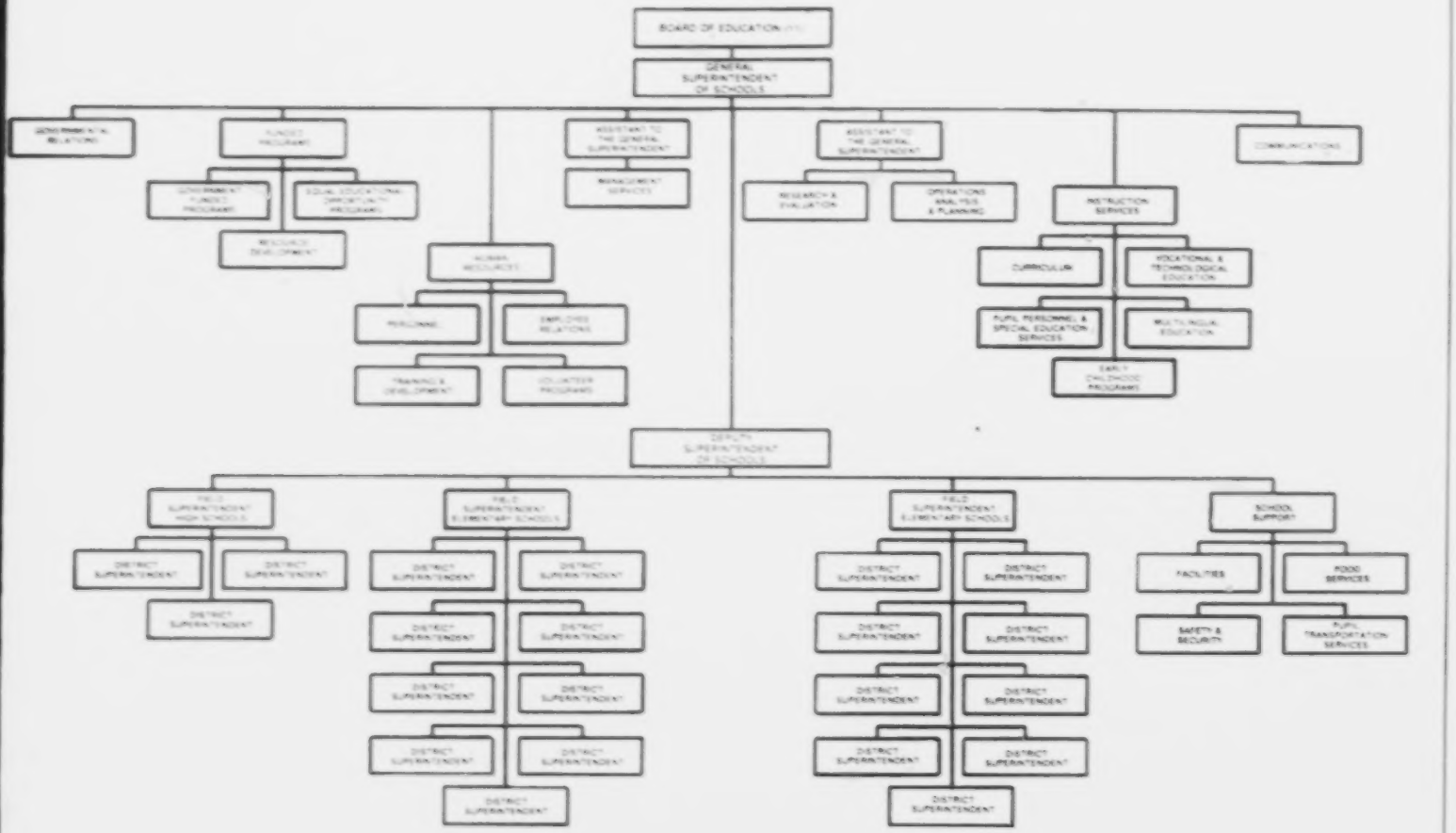
- The elementary schools are divided into twenty geographical districts, each headed by a District Superintendent. The high schools are divided into three geographical districts, each headed by a District Superintendent.

- A huge staff of highly paid administrators in the central administration have responsibility for such areas as special education, bilingual education, curriculum, desegregation, and research. These departments are under the overall supervision of the Associate Superintendent for Instructional Services, and various other Assistant or Associate Superintendents shown on the chart.

You will be more effective in getting your local school to improve if you can make the relevant parts of this complicated bureaucracy work for your school and if you fight for what your local school needs from this bureaucracy. Here are some examples of problems that SCHOOLWATCH parents have already overcome because they have learned how to deal with the bureaucracy:

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Chicago Public Schools
ORGANIZATIONAL CHART



■ You may find that your school principal refuses to give you information that you need to assess your local school, and you may need to file an Access to Information Request with the school system's Office of Information to get what you need.

■ You may find that your school principal is not following the school system's discipline code, and need to get your District Superintendent to require him to follow it.

■ You may find that your school custodians do not clean your school properly, even though your principal makes sincere efforts to get them to shape up. So you may have to go to the District Engineer to get the custodians to improve or be replaced.

■ You may find that your school is not getting a fair share of desegregation funds, and you may have to go to the department responsible for school desegregation (the Office of Equal Educational Opportunity) to get this changed.

■ You may find that plans for changing the attendance boundaries for your school put your children in danger of gang attacks, and you may have to fight with the District Superintendent to get these boundary decisions changed.

■ You may find that you need some extra staff or money to carry out your School Improvement Plan, and need to press your demand for more resources with a variety of administrators and with the Board of Education members.

Explaining in detail how to fight the bureaucracy to get changes like these made would require a whole separate handbook. However, here are a few basic points to keep in mind:

■ As much as possible, hold your own school's principal and staff responsible for making changes and getting things done. Don't start a time-consuming journey through the bureaucracy until you are convinced that your local school has done everything possible to resolve a problem.

■ If you do decide to push the bureaucracy to get something done, gather the best information you can about who has the authority to make the changes you want and then hound that person. Many District Superintendents and downtown administrators will try to pass the buck to someone else. Don't let them send you on a wild goose chase.

■ Work with a group of parents, not on your own. The school system pays much more attention to a dissatisfied group of thirty people than to one or two.

■ Don't play by the bureaucracy's rules. For example, if you can't get a straight answer from your school's principal, you might consider going directly to school board members, to your local newspaper, to elected local or state politicians to exert pressure in resolving your problem.

There are dozens of things that you might want to get the bureaucracy to do to help turn your school into an effective school. Given our limited space in this handbook, we can only provide some preliminary information to help you decide what changes in the bureaucracy can help your school. Below we describe:

■ One specific change that definitely needs to be made so that Chicago's schools can become effective: a basic shift in authority, so that parents, teachers, and school principals have a much stronger voice in deciding how their school is run.

■ Some examples of other changes in the bureaucracy you should consider working for. These examples are based on *The Bottom Line* report and on the experiences of SCHOOLWATCH parent groups, who have identified key bureaucratic obstacles to making the ten ingredients of an effective school a reality in their local schools.

SHIFT MUCH POWER TO PARENTS, TEACHERS, AND ADMINISTRATORS AT EACH LOCAL SCHOOL

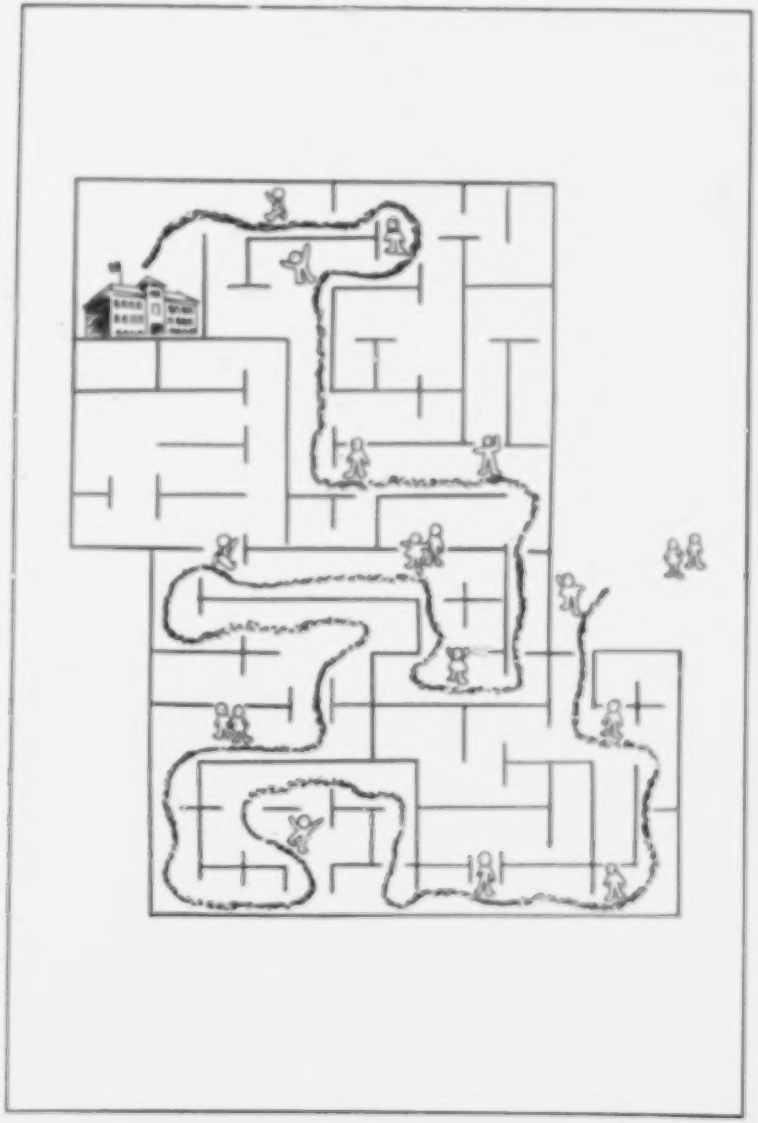
SCHOOLWATCH believes in making parents equal partners in the education of their children. SCHOOLWATCH believes that parents, teachers, and administrators in each school must work together to improve their school, so that it has the ten ingredients needed to

make it effective. SCHOOLWATCH parent groups are proving that this process can work in individual schools. An essential next step is to shift much decision-making power across the entire school system to parents, teachers, and administrators at the school level, so that it will be easier to improve all 592 Chicago schools. The philosophy behind SCHOOLWATCH must be made a part of the day-to-day workings of the system, so that the suffocating power of the school system's bureaucracy can be changed for the benefit of our children.

For years, Chicagoans have debated about how to make the huge Chicago school system provide a better education. Some have proposed that the school system should be broken up into ten or twenty separate school districts. However, we don't think this proposal goes far enough, since breaking the system down into ten districts would still leave ten school systems that are each the size of Oakland, California, or Buffalo, New York. For Chicago to have effective schools, the shift in power needs to be even more basic, so that parents and school staff at each local school have major authority over critical decisions that determine whether their school will be effective, including decisions about who the principal is and what the principal is accountable for accomplishing, who teaches in the school, what priority changes are needed to improve the school, what kind of educational program the school will have, and how the school will spend its budget.

SCHOOLWATCH parents are already fighting for the school system and the state legislature to shift decision making to the school level. Our ideas are based on a highly successful state-wide program in California called the California School Improvement Program, that is already operating in 4,000 schools there. Here is how the process would work in Chicago:

- A School Improvement Council will be formed in each Chicago Public School, consisting of equal numbers of parents and school staff.
- This School Improvement Council will carry out a thorough assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of their local school, based on the ingredients of an effective school.



■ The Council will develop a plan for improving the school, a plan that focuses on improving reading and math skills, cutting dropout and truancy rates, and getting students ready for jobs and for college.

■ When a school's plan is accepted through an objective review process, the school staff will be committed to making the basic changes that the plan spells out. The School Improvement Council will then become a permanent decision-making group to hold the school accountable for carrying out their plan.

■ To help a local school carry out its school improvement plan, the school will receive $100 per student each year. The additional money might be used, for example, to retrain teachers in a new method for teaching reading that the Council has decided to adopt.

This school improvement process consists of the basic steps for improving the schools that SCHOOLWATCH parent groups are already putting into practice in the schools where they are now active. The successes of these local schools show concretely how the SCHOOLWATCH process can make Chicago schools better. SCHOOLWATCH is now pressing for a basic shift in decision making down to the school level that will encourage the SCHOOLWATCH process to take place in hundreds of Chicago public schools.

OTHER CHANGES IN THE BUREAUCRACY ARE NEEDED

As you go about evaluating your local school, you will undoubtedly decide that other changes in the school system's bureaucracy are needed so that your school can become more effective. Again, because the main focus of this handbook is on improving your local schools, we don't have the space to discuss all these possible changes in detail. Instead, we briefly review a few of the ingredients of an effective school below, and for each one we discuss an example or two of the broader changes in the way the school system operates that are needed so that our local schools can become effective. These examples can start you thinking about reforms that you would like to see in the bureaucracy as you go about investigating your own local school.

Ingredient 1 -- Principal Is Educational Leader. It is virtually impossible for a person to be selected to be a principal in the Chicago Public Schools unless they have come up through the ranks of the school system. Yet those who make it through the present selection process for principal often do not possess the skills and creativity needed to create an effective local school. In some of the best school systems across the country, the job of principal is wide open to qualified educators from anywhere, and many principals are chosen from outside the school system.

> *Question -- Do the procedures for selecting principals need to be changed, so that the people who become principals in Chicago are more likely to have the skills and creativity of an educational leader?*

Ingredient 2 -- Safe Attractive School. The Uniform Discipline Code that has been set up for the school system has some positive points, since it spells out fairly reasonable uniform punishments for specific kinds of misbehavior and since it emphasizes in-school punishments and de-emphasizes suspension. However, the focus of the Discipline Code is still on punishment; its procedures don't encourage or require the school to see whether a child's misbehavior results from some problem with the educational program or with the difficulties that a particular teacher has in maintaining discipline. Furthermore, many schools disregard the Discipline Code, continuing to use whatever discipline procedures and punishments they think are best. For example, some schools continue to suspend students for being absent or tardy.

> *Question -- Are changes needed in the Uniform Discipline Code and in the ways that local schools are held accountable for carrying it out?*

Even in some schools where the principal has made major efforts to have the school cleaned properly, custodians don't do an adequate job of cleaning the school. This is because Illinois law and school board policy restrict the principal's authority to the educational

operation of the school, and the custodian is not directly accountable to the principal. Furthermore, custodial jobs have in the past been filled through City Hall as patronage jobs.

> *Question -- Should custodians be responsible directly to school principals? Are other changes needed in the system for selecting custodians and holding them accountable?*

Ingredient 3 -- Staff Combats Truancy and Dropout. One shortcoming of the school system's efforts to deal with truancy and dropout is that the system has not kept accurate statistics about the extent of these problems. Official student attendance is taken at one time early in the day, but by afternoon many students who have been marked officially present have skipped out. At South Shore High School, for example, the official attendance rate was 83% in 1983-84, but reporters who visited the school found that less than half the students were present for many afternoon classes.

Dropout statistics are also compiled inaccurately, and the official dropout rates greatly underestimate the real extent of the problem. *The Bottom Line* report first brought these discrepancies to light. At Crane High School, for example, the official dropout rate was cited as being less than 10% for the Class of 1984, but *The Bottom Line* study showed that the real dropout rate was more than 50%.

When systems for keeping such vital information are based on deception, schools that try to keep accurate records are penalized, because it is easier to make a school look good by using inaccurate data than by making real improvements in attendance and dropout rates.

> *Question -- How should the school system's procedures for keeping track of attendance and dropout rates be changed so that the public can believe that these statistics are accurate and so that those who attempt to falsify this data are identified and punished? Do we need some outside experts to conduct an independent audit to straighten out these systems?*

Ingredient 6 -- Learning to Read Is the Highest Priority. In Chapters 2 and 3, we explained that students who read well must not only be able to sound out words, but also understand what they read, talk about it, write about it, and enjoy reading. Until recently, the primary system for reading instruction in the Chicago Public Schools was Chicago Mastery Learning Reading (CMLR). CMLR consists mostly of workbooks that ask questions and then require a child to choose the "right answer" from a group of preselected answers. This reading program is based on teaching 253 skills that supposedly are needed for good reading, but there is no research evidence that these skills are really the ones that children need so that they can read with understanding.

In *The Bottom Line*, SCHOOLWATCH presented disturbing evidence that Chicago's students were not learning to read through the CMLR program. *The Bottom Line* urged that the Superintendent of Schools form a committee to assess CMLR and to replace it with an approach to reading instruction based on the SCHOOLWATCH recommendations for teaching reading described in Chapter 3.

The Superintendent of Schools did form this committee, in which SCHOOLWATCH representatives played a key part. The committee's report was a major victory, since it recommended that CMLR be sharply deemphasized, that reading real books should become the focus for reading instruction, and that each local school should have a major role in deciding how reading will be taught.

However, getting rid of CMLR and getting some better school system policies on paper is only the first step.

> *Question -- What additional policies, retraining for teachers, new materials, and other changes are needed to help insure that a better approach to reading instruction is actually carried out in our local schools?*

Ingredient 9 -- Staff Development Is Tied to Specific School Goals. Chicago's present system for improving the skills of its teachers (its staff development program) is extremely disorganized. The school system has an army of specialists whose job is to help teachers improve their abilities to teach. There are specialists in different subjects -- like science. There are specialists who are tied to different special programs -- like bilingual education. Frequently, they hold workshops at individual schools that teachers are required to attend.

Another important type of staff development are the courses that teachers take in universities that qualify them for additional salary increases. Often teachers have enormous leeway in deciding what kinds of courses they need.

As we discussed in Chapter 3, effective staff development for teachers should be based in large part on individual school improvement plans. Teachers should receive training and assistance that helps them carry out the specific plan for improving their school. Given the disorganized menu of staff development experiences that are now available to teachers, it is extremely difficult to get staff development experiences set up that are tailored to a local school's priorities for improvement.

> *Question -- What changes are needed in the staff development activities of the school system that will make these activities useful to a local school in carrying out its plan for improvement?*

Ingredient 10 -- Special Programs Are Carefully Designed. One problem with the special education programs for handicapped students in Chicago, compared with other big city school systems, is that Chicago puts a very high percentage of special education students in separate classes and schools and a low percentage of special education students in part-time resource programs that allow them to spend most of their time in regular classes. (Designs for Change originally exposed this problem in a report called *Caught in the Web: Misplaced Children in Chicago's Classes for the Mentally Retarded.*)

Most experts believe that Chicago's approach to special education is very damaging to children, since separate schools and classes are likely to become low quality dumping grounds for children, where they are likely to remain for the rest of their school careers.

Because Chicago has so many separate classes and schools for handicapped children already set up, teachers and principals who are evaluating children for special education must fit children into these existing special education programs. Thus, even if the staff of your local school want to place handicapped children in part-time resource rooms, they often find it nearly impossible to do so.

Question -- How can the operation of Chicago's special education system be changed so that Chicago has a lower percentage of separate classes and separate schools for handicapped children?

MAKING THE BUREAUCRACY WORK FOR YOUR SCHOOL

To summarize briefly, this is the advice that we're offering about how to make the bureaucracy work for your school:

- Put most of your efforts into analyzing your local school and fighting for changes there.
- As you look at your school, you will find some barriers that are put in your way by the school system's bureaucracy, even when your local school is doing all it can to improve.
- To deal with these problems, you will need to find out about the bureaucracy and decide what needs to be changed about it.
- One change that is essential is to shift much more decision making down to the local school, and to make school staff and parents equal partners in this decision making. School Improvement Councils should be set up in every school so that this partnership can take place.
- There are many other barriers to creating an effective school that are set up by the bureaucracy and that you may decide you have to attack. These are described in a SCHOOLWATCH report called *The Bottom Line*. We have briefly discussed some examples of these problems in this chapter: a system for selecting principals that keeps effective leaders from becoming principals, a reading curriculum that is regarded as a disaster by many reading experts around the country, systems for keeping track of attendance and dropout rates that hide the true extent of the problems. You will undoubtedly need to join with parents from other schools to take on some larger issues like these as part of a long-range commitment to improving your local school.

CHAPTER 5

Action

As we are finishing . . .

. . . this handbook, Chicago has just completed its annual financial crisis and teachers' strike. Because the school system is in this constant state of bedlam, most people are satisfied just to see the school doors open.

But as SCHOOLWATCH parents spend time in local schools across the city and as we review reading scores and dropout data, we realize that just keeping the doors open and adding an extra program here and an extra teacher there are not enough. As SCHOOLWATCH documented in *The Bottom Line* report, our schools are not teaching the majority of children the basic skills that they will need to survive in tomorrow's world. And if the majority of our children don't learn to read well, the city of Chicago will not survive.

To meet this crisis, the Chicago Public Schools need basic changes now. And the place to start is in a school that you care about. Whether you are a parent, journalist, business person, or community group leader, you should begin by investigating a specific local school, using the SCHOOLWATCH process or parts of it. By focusing on a local school, you can get a real understanding about what most needs changing in a school system where change is so difficult. Businesses who adopt local Chicago schools should understand how effective their adopted school is, so that a business investment of time and money can bring the greatest return in terms of school improvement. Journalists from the Chicago media who cover school issues should be investigating the effectiveness of specific local schools and the barriers that are keeping them from becoming effective. Community groups should be analyzing the effectiveness of local schools in their neighborhood and pressing for improvements that are needed.

And what about parents? We believe that parents must be the backbone of any major successful effort to improve the schools. So below we talk in more detail about what parents can do to get started in turning their local school around.

WORK WITH A GROUP OF PARENTS

You can't accomplish much as one person. Join with other parents to begin investigating your local school and how it needs to change. Some SCHOOLWATCH parent groups are Parent Teacher Associations. Some are Local School Advisory Councils. Some are independent parent organizations. Any parent organization has a right to interview school staff, to observe in classrooms, and to get reports and information about their school. The school system's new freedom of information policy guarantees that right.

The first step to saving your local school is to get a group of parents together who are committed to struggling for several years until they get real results.

INTERVIEW YOUR PRINCIPAL

Once you have brought parents together, a good way to get an initial picture of the strengths and weaknesses of your local school is to interview your school principal. In Appendix B, we have included a Principal Interview, which contains a few key questions about each of the ten ingredients of an effective school. Interview your principal by asking these questions and others you think are important. Tape-record or take notes on what he/she says. Get documents and statistics from your principal. Do some additional interviewing and observation to check out what the principal says. Then go over the answers and the written documents. Although you can't evaluate your school based on one interview, interviewing your principal will help you focus on the problems that you want to look into more closely.

INVESTIGATE ONE OF THE INGREDIENTS OF EFFECTIVENESS

Analyzing all ten ingredients of effectiveness in your local school is a major commitment that can take a year. But you don't need to start by doing all ten. In particular, the first four can each be looked at separately:

Ingredient 1 -- Principal Is Educational Leader

Ingredient 2 -- Safe Attractive School

Ingredient 3 -- Staff Combats Truancy and Dropout

Ingredient 4 -- Parents Work to Improve the Learning Program

Starting with one of these ingredients can focus your energy on issues that many parents already have strong concerns about: the principal's leadership ability, school discipline, the physical condition of the school, preventing truancy and dropout, or the way that the school relates to parents. You can be confident that if you investigate one of these issues thoroughly, make recommendations for change, and then follow up on them, you will be working on problems that are important for your children's education. Furthermore, if you can bring about changes in one area, the principal and teachers will become more responsive to recommendations about other issues.

An advantage of investigating one of these four issues at first is that each can be looked at without extensive classroom observations and teacher interviews; you can find out most of what you need to know by interviewing the principal, interviewing students, interviewing parents, and observing the halls, cafeteria, and playground. SCHOOLWATCH has developed information sheets, plans for interviews and observations, and SCHOOLWATCH Report Cards that can help you look at each of these ingredients. SCHOOLWATCH will also be holding regular training sessions in some parts of the city for parents who are interested in investigating one of these four ingredients in their local school.

START A READ-A-THON IN YOUR SCHOOL

A different way to get started is to conduct a Read-A-Thon in your school. A Read-A-Thon is a special activity that lasts for about ten weeks, in which students are encouraged to read books on their own, and both individual students and classrooms receive awards based on the amount of reading that they do. Parents can convince the principal and teachers to participate in a Read-A-Thon, get additional books donated to the school for students' independent reading, get prizes donated by local business people, and help the school staff carry out the Read-A-Thon.

In the course of sponsoring the Read-A-Thon, parents can learn a great deal about their school, develop good relationships with the principal and with teachers, help students read independently, and recruit other parents to become active in the school. A successful Read-A-Thon can then lay some groundwork for investigating how effective your school is, as a next step.

SCHOOLWATCH can provide information to interested parents about how to run a successful Read-A-Thon.

CARRY OUT THE WHOLE SCHOOLWATCH PROCESS

As we have described it in the earlier chapters, the SCHOOLWATCH process for investigating your local school involves:

- Learning what should be going on in an effective school.
- Evaluating your school to see what its strengths and weaknesses are, compared with each of the ten ingredients of an effective school.
- Preparing SCHOOLWATCH Report Cards that highlight what you find.
- Pressing for improvements based on this analysis.

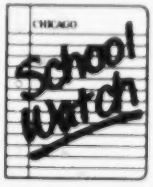
This process takes a high level of commitment. It will take a year of training sessions, interviewing and observing in your school, thinking about what you have found. But the payoff for your children will be great. You will have taken a giant step in making your school a place where your kids learn to read.

Presently, SCHOOLWATCH can only provide help to a small number of parent groups to carry out the full SCHOOLWATCH process. If you are interested in seeing whether we can help your group, get in touch with us.

JOIN SCHOOLWATCH

SCHOOLWATCH is a city-wide campaign for better schools. SCHOOLWATCH not only helps parents become active at local schools, but is also a major city-wide force for better education. You can become a SCHOOLWATCH member by filling out the application at the end of this handbook and returning it to Designs for Change.

And as a member of SCHOOLWATCH, you can be a part of our simple dream for our children: that all our kids can learn to read.



Membership Card

I believe all our kids can learn to read.

A project of
Designs for Change
312-922-0317

Signature

Appendix A
GRADED READING SELECTIONS

You can use the following eight reading selections to get a general idea of the reading ability of children in grades three through eight. Two copies of each selection are included, one for the child to read aloud and one for the parent to follow as the child reads. Below are some answers to questions you might ask about how to use the reading selections. At the end are specific directions.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

What grade should my child be in for me to use this reading check? Use with children in grades three through eight. Testing first and second graders is not a good idea because they are still learning basic skills. How well first and second graders read one paragraph means little. Their abilities are growing and changing at uneven rates.

How do these selections compare to what my child reads at school? Each reading selection was written based on the same standards used in preparing basic reading textbooks. Therefore, these selections will give you an idea about how well your child is reading in school.

When should I check my child? These reading selections are written for children in the middle of each grade level. If you don't use them in the middle of the year, take this into account.

What if my child makes mistakes? A child can easily make some mistakes in reading any selection. Let her make mistakes and do not correct her. In the circle at the bottom of the page is the "passing" number of mistakes for that reading selection. If your child reads the selection with that number of mistakes or fewer, then she is comfortable with reading material at that grade level. If she makes more than that number of mistakes, that selection was probably frustrating. A rough measure of your child's reading grade level in the highest one she can read with a passing number of mistakes.

What kinds of mistakes do children often make in reading aloud? Listen for these three kinds of mistakes: (1) Mispronouncing a word or substituting one word for another. (2) Leaving out a word or pausing and then skipping over a word. (3) Repeating two or more words.

How do I keep track of mistakes? On your copy of the reading selection, quietly mark with a pencil the places where the child makes a mistake. At the end of reading a selection, count up the total number of mistakes the child made for that selection. Compare that number to the passing number in the circle at the bottom of the page.

Do I tell my child this is a reading test? Be honest and direct. By third or fourth grade most kids are used to reading tests. Explain

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you want to help him read better. Tell him that it will be easier for you to help him if you know at about what grade level he is reading. Don't force children to do the test when they don't want to. Let them choose the time.

How do I make this a comfortable experience for my child and me? Be sure to do it when your child is in a good mood. Keep distractions down. (TV, radio, and stereo off. Friend, brothers, and sisters out of the way.) Include some hugs.

What do I do if my child is very nervous and makes a lot of mistakes? Relax yourself. Try again when your child is more relaxed and willing to try. Children who have had failing or frustrating experiences with reading in school may bring bad feelings to this situation. Try to give lots of support, not criticisms or judgment.

Does this test reading comprehension? No. It just checks the child's ability to read aloud. However, you can check how well your child understood the selection by asking a few simple questions on your own about each selection as you go along. Here are three sample questions: (1) What would be a good title? (for main idea) (2) What did the boy take with him? (for detail) (3) What happened after the girl . . . ? (for sequence)

DIRECTIONS

1. Read all the selections to yourself before starting.

2. Start with the reading selection two grade levels below the grade your child is now in. Each selection is coded with a letter. The letter codes correspond with the following grade levels:

Selection **A** is first-grade level
Selection **B** is second-grade level
Selection **C** is third-grade level
Selection **D** is fourth-grade level
Selection **E** is fifth-grade level
Selection **F** is sixth-grade level
Selection **G** is seventh-grade level
Selection **H** is eighth-grade level

3. Ask your child to read the selection silently to himself before he reads it aloud to you.

4. Ask your child to read it aloud to you at a relaxed pace. This is not a timed test.

5. Tell your child it is okay to make mistakes.

6. If your child makes a mistake but then corrects herself, do not count it as a mistake.

7. At the end of the selection, count up the number of mistakes your child made and compare it to the "passing" number in the circle at the bottom of each page. If your child made fewer or the same number of mistakes as in the circle, go on to the next selection.

8. Stop when your child has made more mistakes than the passing number for selection. The last selection your child "passes" is a rough indication of his reading level.

9. Praise your child for how well she did. Answer any questions she has about how she did.

REMEMBER: This is not a comprehensive reading test. But it will give you some essential information with which to approach your school.

Read to find out how Lisa learns to swim.

Lisa wanted to learn how to swim.
Her mother took her to a nearby pool.

At first Lisa just splashed and played. Next
she tried to float. Then her mother said,
"Try to swim now."

Lisa put her face in the water. Then she
began to kick her feet and move her arms.
"Did you see me?" she cried. "I was moving."

"Good," said her mother. "You are getting better."

Lisa kept trying to swim. "This is fun,"
she thought. "Soon I will be able to swim."

4

Read to find out about Matt's visit to the hospital.

One day, Matt went with Mother to visit his grandfather in the hospital. It was a long drive in the car. When they got there, Matt was amazed to see how big the hospital was. It had ten floors and rose way up into the sky.

Matt and Mother walked inside and then went up the elevator. At last they got to the right room. Grandpa was sitting up in bed. He smiled when he saw them.

While Mother talked to Grandfather, Matt had to be very quiet. Then Grandpa showed Matt how to make the bed move up and down. All you had to do was press a button!

Soon it was time to leave. Matt and Mother kissed Grandfather good-bye. On the way home, Matt thought about the hospital. He enjoyed his visit, but he would be glad when Grandpa was back home.

6

Read to find out what science books can tell you.

Why is the sky blue, and what makes the moon glow at night? Where does snow come from, and why does the wind blow? How far away are the planets and stars in outer space?

There are so many things we want to know. You may have some special questions of your own. Where can you find the answers?

You might start by looking in a science book. Ask your teacher where you can find a good science book that will answer some of your questions. The library should have many interesting science books.

Continue asking questions and perhaps some day you will be a scientist yourself. Maybe you will discover the answer to a very important question!

5

Read to find out how Mary and Dad get ready for their fishing trip.

The alarm clock rang before the sun came up. Slowly, Dad climbed out of bed and stumbled over to Mary's room. "Wake up, Mary," he said. "It's time to go fishing."

Mary rubbed her eyes, got out of bed, and with one big yawn and stretch was wide awake. She loved going fishing with Dad on early summer mornings.

Quickly, Mary got dressed and went into the kitchen to make breakfast. Dad and Mary had their jobs memorized. Dad would get the fishing equipment ready and pack the car while Mary fixed eggs and toast. Dad always had some coffee and Mary always fixed herself a cup of hot chocolate.

Only a half an hour after the alarm clock went off, Mary and Dad were out the door. The sky was beginning to show the first light of dawn as Dad backed the car out of the driveway and headed toward the mountain road. Mary smiled as they left town and drove up into the foothills. She could already feel the fish tugging on her line.

7

Read to find out about Sam and the talent show.

Sam saw the notice on the school bulletin board about the talent show and decided he would enter. Since he could now play a number of songs on his trumpet, it would be fun to perform.

Every day after school, Sam and the other students had to practice for the show. At first everyone made mistakes, but gradually they improved. Other children, who were not in the show, sold tickets and decorated the auditorium.

Finally the night of the show arrived and Sam was very nervous. Many children did their acts before it was Sam's turn. There were three singers, a piano player, and a boy who did magic tricks.

When Sam's turn came, he played a song called "Star Dust." When it was over, everyone cheered loudly. The lights were so bright that Sam could not see the audience, but he could sure hear them! He smiled and bowed as the clapping continued. All that work had sure been worth it.

6

Read to find out about a city that floats.

If you can imagine a city floating on the ocean, then you know what an aircraft carrier resembles. These huge ships go on long journeys around the world and act as floating airports for the world's most modern airplanes.

It is very tricky landing a jet airplane on one of these ships. The problem is that the plane needs help coming to a quick stop. When a pilot comes in for a landing, a strong metal hook comes down from underneath the plane. This hook then catches on a cable stretched across the deck of the ship, which brings the plane in safely. The giant deck can park about 80 airplanes at one time.

Since these ships are often at sea for a long time, and because they have as many as 5,000 crew members, they must be self-sufficient. There are stores, a laundry, radio station, post office, and hospital on board. Ladders connect the many decks, and each deck is divided into different sections.

A special language is used on board ship. The left side is called "port," the right side is called "starboard," and the walls are "bulkheads."

If you ever have a chance to visit one of these large ships, you will find it a fascinating experience.

8

Read to find out about something you take to school every day.

It seems that everybody has a pencil, or has just lost or misplaced one. In the United States alone, billions of lead pencils are made and used each year. But as widely used as these writing tools are, very few people know how pencils are made. In fact, when is the last time you ever thought about what a marvelous invention the lead pencil is?

Interestingly enough, lead pencils contain no lead at all. What is referred to as "lead" is actually a thin stick of material composed of graphite mixed with clay. This mixture can be varied to make a very soft or hard substance. Soft lead pencils make wide, heavy-looking lines, while hard pencil lead results in sharp, thin lines.

To prepare pencil lead, clay, powdered graphite and water are combined to make a dough-like substance. This mixture is then pushed through tiny holes in a metal plate, and out come thin ribbons of lead that are then cut into pieces. The leads are placed into narrow slabs of wood, topped then with another piece of wood to complete the pencil. Next comes a coat of paint or varnish, and the addition of the all-important eraser. Now the pencil is ready to help you write a note, compose a poem or take a test.

9

Read to find out about a famous race.

In 490 B.C., a Greek soldier ran over twenty miles to announce to his city that they had been victorious at the Battle of Marathon. The legend says that after gasping out the good news, the soldier supposedly dropped dead from exhaustion.

Today, people throughout the world compete in races equal to the distance that the Greek soldier ran over two thousand years ago. Named after the famous battle, these races of exactly 26 miles, 385 yards, are called marathons. The marathon is one of the longest running races in the world today.

It may seem incredible, but some people can complete this race in less than two and one half hours, although most people take considerably longer. Because this race is so demanding, some competitors never finish it at all.

Preparing for such a long distance race takes a tremendous amount of practice. Anyone who even hopes to finish this race in less than four hours must train by running ten or more miles a day, month after month. It is only after this lengthy preparation that a runner is ready to enter serious competition.

Each year, the men and women who participate in this race get swifter and their speed reaches new heights. Someday soon, someone will most certainly complete the marathon in less than two hours. What an unbelievable time!

There is no doubt that the Greek soldier of long ago would be amazed if he knew what he had begun.

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Appendix B
INTERVIEWING YOUR PRINCIPAL TO CHECK OUT YOUR SCHOOL

Whether you are a parent, business person, journalist, or other concerned citizen who wants to investigate a local school, an excellent way to start is to interview the principal.

The principal is the best single source of information about how the school measures up against the ten ingredients of an effective school. And perhaps no other specific ingredient is as important to an effective school as a principal who is an educational leader.

Beginning on page 85 is a Principal Interview that you can use to get a strong basic understanding of how good the school is and how good its principal is. The sections of the interview focus, in turn, on each of the ten ingredients of an effective school and can form the basis for rating the school on each ingredient. For each of the ten ingredients, there is a page reference back to the relevant section of Chapter 3; by rereading the discussion of each ingredient, you can decide how to rate the school based on the principal's answers and the other information you gather while visiting the school.

For each ingredient of an effective school, give the school an overall rating on the following scale:

4 - *OUTSTANDING* - The school has a major strength in this area, and there are no significant weaknesses.

3 - *GOOD* - The school has some important strengths in this area, but there are also some important weaknesses in this area that need to be overcome.

2 - *NEEDS IMPROVEMENT* - The school has some weaknesses in this area, although there is some evidence of strength as well.

1 - *MAJOR DEFICIENCY* - There is a major deficiency in this area; this ingredient is essentially lacking in the school.

Completing this Principal Interview will give you a very good initial understanding of how good the school is. However, a complete evaluation of the school will require additional interviews with teachers, parents, and students, as well as observations in the school's classrooms, halls, and playgrounds. We have not included detailed questions and rating systems for doing this additional investigation. However, beside each question in the Principal Interview, we have included brief notes about the types of questions to ask and observations to make to crosscheck what the principal says, as well as the kinds of statistics and documents that will be helpful.

Here are some points to remember in making the Principal Interview as informative and useful as possible:

- Many educators talk in jargon and generalities. Request clear explanations of any terms you don't understand. Most important, repeatedly request concrete examples of specific events that have occurred in the school and activities the principal can point to that are going on right now that illustrate any claims being made. If the principal says confidentiality is a barrier to discussing specific examples, ask her to omit names and alter details to protect confidentiality.

- Remember, as we stressed in Chapter 3, the principal must be a leader. The principal's job is tough, but the average Chicago principal makes almost $50,000 a year. For that salary, you should

expect leadership, not excuses. Don't let the principal lead you off into a discussion of all the reasons why he or she can't do the job. Constantly come back to questions about what the principal has done and can do to improve the school.

- Also, don't accept the excuse that the demands of running things day-to-day block the principal from pursuing long-term objectives for improving the school. A leader is someone who can step into a strong current and walk steadily upstream, rather than being swept along by immediate problems.

- As noted above, act like a detective. Compare what the principal says with what teachers, parents, and students say; what you observe going on in classrooms and hallways; and what statistics and written documents say about the school. Use our suggestions under "Additional Evidence" to help you decide what to do.

- Illinois and the Chicago Public Schools have strong policies for public access to information. All of the information and documents referred to in the Principal Interview are clearly public information. At the end of Appendix B, we explain what to do if the principal is unwilling to provide information to you.

- Depending on how talkative the principal is, the interview may take a long time. You might consider breaking it into two parts. Or you might want to conduct an initial interview, do some other interviewing and observing in the school, and then return for a second interview based on what you've learned.

PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW

ADDITIONAL EVIDENCE

(Information about how to obtain some of the documents cited below appears at the end of the interview.)

Background Information

a. Could you please describe your personal history in education? How did you get involved in education? What is the history of your career in teaching and administration? What schools? How long?

b. Could you tell us a little about this school and the students and neighborhood it serves? (Include student body size, racial composition, socioeconomic composition, nature of neighborhood served, size and nature of the staff, special programs in the schools.)

. . . . A one-page statistical profile of each local school, that includes reading scores, enrollment, racial composition, and other data is included in *Test Scores and Selected School Characteristics*. Get a copy of this profile before your interview.

Rating ☐

Ingredient 1. PRINCIPAL IS EDUCATIONAL LEADER.
The principal provides strong leadership and works toward clear educational goals for the school. (See pages 21 to 23 for background information.)

a. What are your three highest priorities for improving the quality of instruction for children in this school, based on your analysis of this particular school's strengths and weaknesses? If we were to walk around the school, what evidence would we see that you and your staff are working on these priorities day-to-day?

. . . . Ask teachers and active parents whether they are aware of priorities named by the principal and whether anything is actually being done about them. By observing in classrooms and elsewhere, look for evidence that school staff is working on these priorities.

b. Do you have a specific school improvement plan that is in writing that explains your priorities for improvement and how you will reach them? Can we have a copy of this plan? What actions are you taking to see that your improvement plan is carried out?

. . . . Review any written school improvement plan. Ask teachers and active parents whether they are aware of the plan and whether it is being worked on.

c. How often do you (or other administrators who assist you) visit classes during the year to observe teachers and provide them with advice? When you visit classes, what are you looking for? After you visit a class, how do you follow up to see that improvements are made?

. . . . Ask teachers about the principal's claims concerning the frequency and focus of classroom visits and whether they regard the principal (or others who assist the principal) as a source of useful advice for improving instruction.

Principal Interview	Additional Evidence
d. Would you please give me two or three recent examples in which you visited a teacher, identified some improvements that were needed, and then followed up to see that these changes took place?	. . . . Ask teachers if they can cite such examples of useful assistance and supervision.
e. What steps do you take to make sure that various staff members who work with the same children coordinate their work? (Ask about coordination between regular classroom teachers, between regular and special class teachers, between teachers and administrative staff.) Could you give a few recent examples of how you make this coordination process work?	. . . . Ask teachers whether and in what ways this coordination is taking place. Observe teacher planning meetings.
Rating ☐ **Ingredient 2. SAFE ATTRACTIVE SCHOOL.** *The staff creates an atmosphere in the school that is orderly, safe, serious, and attractive -- without being oppressive. (See pages 23 to 26 for background information.)*	. . . . Get *Not Just Punishment: Discipline in Schools That Work* for more detailed information about effective school discipline.
a. How do you carry out the school system's *Uniform Discipline Code* in this school? Could you give me some examples?	. . . . Get a copy of *Uniform Discipline Code* and the booklets that explain it for parents and students; review it in advance.
b. Do you have your own school rules for discipline, in addition to the *Uniform Discipline Code*? What are the most important aspects of your local school rules?	. . . . Ask for a copy of any local school rules.
c. How do you make sure that staff, students, and parents really understand and follow the discipline rules for the school? Do you hand them out? What else do you do?	. . . . Ask teachers, parents, and students how they are made aware of the school's discipline policy.
d. What are your top priorities for improving discipline in the school? If we walked around the school, what evidence would we see that your staff is working on these priorities?	. . . . Probe for evidence of improvement efforts focused on discipline, through observation and by asking teachers, parents, and students.
e. Do you have any regular procedures or programs to help children who are serious discipline problems, so that you can get at the root of their problems, in addition to punishing them? Describe how they work and whether they are effective. Please give some examples of what you've done to help specific children.	. . . . Ask teachers and parents whether such procedures or programs exist, how they are carried out, and how well they work.
f. What are the major problems you face in terms of the repair of the building, building maintenance and cleaning, and, in general, creating an attractive physical environment? What are you doing to solve these problems?	. . . . Develop a checklist that includes condition and upkeep of halls, classrooms, playgrounds, special purpose facilities, windows, exterior, lights, and heat. Use the checklist to rate the school. Ask teachers, parents, and students about problems in building condition and repair and what is actually being done to solve them.

Principal Interview	Additional Evidence
Rating ☐ **Ingredient 3. STAFF COMBATS TRUANCY AND DROPOUT.** *The school makes serious efforts to reduce truancy and dropout. (See pages 26 to 28 for background information.)*	
a. Step by step, what are your procedures for identifying students who are absent all day or for a particular class? What is your school's attendance rate and how is it calculated? What follow-up takes place when a student is absent for a class period or for a day?	. . . . Ask for samples of all relevant forms for keeping track of attendance, as well as attendance data for the school. Ask teachers if attendance is really taken accurately for each class and whether there is a systematic procedure for following up with absent students.
b. What plans and strategies do you use for identifying and following up with students who are frequently absent? (Probe for actions focused on direct work with the student, modifying the child's school program, family involvement, involvement of other agencies.) Can you give some examples of what you have done to help specific children?	. . . . Ask for written plans and information related to chronic truants. Ask parents, students, and teachers whether anything is really being done. Ask any agencies cited by the principal about their working relationship with the school on the truancy problem.
c. Have you identified students attending the school who you think are at high risk of dropping out in the future? How do you identify them? What steps do you take to assist these students? Please give some examples.	. . . . Ask for written plans and information related to dropout prevention. Ask parents, students, teachers, and community agencies what is really being done.
Rating ☐ **Ingredient 4. PARENTS WORK TO IMPROVE THE LEARNING PROGRAM.** *Parents involve themselves in improving the educational program, and the school welcomes parent participation and responds to parent concerns. (See pages 29 to 31 for background information.)*	
a. What different parent groups or community groups are active in the school? How are they set up? How many people are consistently active in them? What are the main issues they have been concerned about and what have they done about them? (Be sure to make a distinction between (1) parent involvement focused on the quality of the school's program and (2) involvement in social and fund-raising activities that are unrelated to educational issues.)	. . . . Interview parent and community leaders named by principal and others identified through other sources about these topics.
b. In what areas of the school's operation do you think a representative parent group should have some say? Can you give some examples of specific instances in which a parent group has come to you with a complaint, problem, or recommendation and you have made significant changes as a result?	. . . . Ask parents and community leaders about their perception of the principal's and teachers' attitudes about participation and any specific examples that they or the principal cite when parents have sought to influence the school.

Principal Interview	Additional Evidence
c. Do you have an organized program or procedure for helping parents to do things at home to assist their children in doing better in school? How does this work?	. . . . Ask for written documents related to this program. Ask teachers and parents whether and how such a program is actually carried out.
d. What steps do you take to keep parents informed about their children's progress in school, including special accomplishments and special problems? If a child is not doing well in school, how do you involve the parents in helping to solve this problem?	. . . . Ask for samples of forms used regularly and written material about specific projects. Ask parents about their perceptions of the accuracy and adequacy of communications from the school and of methods used for involving parents when children have problems.
e. In general, what initiatives have you taken to involve parents in the school? What problems have you encountered?	. . . . Check parent perceptions about these issues.
Rating ☐ **Ingredient 5. STAFF BELIEVES STUDENTS CAN LEARN.** *The principal and teachers firmly believe that their students can learn as well as anybody, and they work hard to make that happen. (See pages 31 to 33 for background information.)*	
a. What family and neighborhood problems do your students bring to school, and what do you do in school to keep these problems from limiting a child's educational progress?	. . . . Ask parent and community leaders about these issues. Check principal's observations against objective data about the neighborhood. Ask teachers and parents whether the steps cited by the principal are actually carried out.
b. We know that in an effective urban school where children learn to read well, there is a strong belief among staff that their students can learn, if they are properly taught. Will you describe some specific things you have done to build up a belief among your staff that your students can learn and to get your staff to act on this belief?	. . . . Ask parents, students, and teachers about these issues. Through teacher interviews and observations, gauge their expectations for their students.
c. What are some ways that you have for giving public recognition to students who have done well academically and in other areas?	. . . . Ask to see documentation of such student recognition efforts. Ask teachers, students, and parents whether such recognition occurs.
d. Do you have a school-wide policy about assigning and correcting homework? How much homework is usually assigned to students? (If there is a homework policy in the school . . .) How do you make sure the homework policy is carried out?	. . . . Ask to see a written homework policy. Ask teachers, parents, and students whether a clear homework policy is carried out and whether homework is regularly assigned and corrected by teachers.
e. Does the school as a whole or do particular programs within the school have selective entrance requirements? Are children divided by ability in the school? How do procedures for selective admission and ability grouping work? How do you guard against the dangers of focusing on a few talented students and underestimating the potential of the majority of students?	. . . . Ask for written procedures describing selective programs and ability grouping. Ask teachers, students, and parents about how these practices work in reality and what their impact is on students not selected for special programs or top ability groups.

Principal Interview	Additional Evidence
Ingredient 6. LEARNING TO READ IS THE FIRST PRIORITY. *The school staff defines learning to read in its broadest sense as the school's first priority, and uses all school subjects and resources to make sure that this happens. (See pages 33 to 36 for background information.)* Rating ☐	
a. Now that the Mastery Learning program is being de-emphasized, each local school will have much more of a voice in how reading is taught. How are you presently teaching reading, and what are your plans for improving reading instruction here?	. . . . Obtain school system's explanation of its new approach to reading instruction (currently titled *Implementation Handbook for the Comprehensive Reading Program*). Check principal's responses to your questions through teacher interviews and observations.
b. One of the crucial points being made by reading experts is that children must learn to understand the meaning of written materials, not just learn isolated skills. What methods do you use to help children to read with understanding?	. . . . Check principal's responses through teacher interviews and observations.
c. Four types of learning experiences appear to be critical for children to learn to read well. How do you incorporate each of the following into your daily instructional program: i. Listening to, reading, and reacting to stories, poems, and other literature ii. Reading silently from materials that children select themselves iii. Composing in writing iv. Learning about language patterns, including phonics, spelling, and grammar.	. . . . For each type of activity, investigate classroom practices through teacher interviews and observations.
Ingredient 7. STUDENT TIME IS SPENT MOSTLY ON LEARNING ACTIVITIES. *School schedules and day-to-day practices of all school staff help children spend as much time as possible actively involved in learning activities. (See pages 36 to 39 for background information.)* Rating ☐	
a. One finding of recent research about effective schools is that effective schools maximize the amount of time that students spend actively involved in learning. For example, teachers in these schools spend most of the class period actively teaching children, classwork is ready for children to start as soon as they arrive, good classroom discipline minimizes time lost in reprimanding children. How, through your leadership, policies, and monitoring of your staff's work, do you attempt to increase time spent on learning activities?	. . . . Observe classrooms to judge how productively time is being used. Ask teachers about any efforts by the principal to increase the effective use of learning time.

Principal Interview	Additional Evidence
b. Based on the research about instruction time, school principals can help increase the amount of time spent on instruction through their guidelines for the daily schedule, by minimizing outside interruptions of classroom activities, etc. What steps have you taken in this area?	. . . . Ask principal for documentation of efforts in this area. Check principal's claims through teacher interviews and *observations.*
c. Research indicates that the amount of time spent on learning goes down when the regular teacher is absent. What is the teacher absence rate in this school, and how does it compare with the city-wide average of 5.6% annually? Are you able to get adequate coverage by qualified substitute teachers when regular teachers are absent? If not, how are classes covered and how does this affect the school's program? What procedures do you use to insure that substitute teachers will be able to continue the teaching process and not just babysit?	. . . . Check principal's responses through teacher interviews.
Rating ☐ **Ingredient 8. FREQUENT CHECKS OF STUDENT PROGRESS.** *The principal and teachers check frequently to see how well children are learning, and use this information to make the educational program more effective. (See pages 39 to 41 for background information.)*	
a. What kinds of test information do you use on a regular basis in this school to judge how well students are doing? In particular, how do you assess the progress of students with limited proficiency in English? Once test information is gathered, how do classroom teachers use it to modify and improve their teaching with specific children? Once this test information is gathered, how do you as the principal use it in your efforts to increase student achievement and to improve teachers' performance?	. . . . Obtain and review in advance the school's profile in *Test Scores and Selected School Characteristics*. Ask for any written documents concerning tests administered, and use of test results by classroom teachers and the principal. Be sure to probe for information about students with limited proficiency in English. Check principal's answers through interviews with teachers.
b. Checking students' progress involves more than standardized tests. What other kinds of observation of students, analysis of their daily work, analysis of classroom quizzes and homework, etc., do you encourage and help teachers to use?	. . . . Check principal's answers through interviews with teachers and classroom observations.
c. Do you have a specific procedure for identifying students who are in trouble academically, assessing what their problems are, and then modifying their learning experience to deal with these problems? How does it work? Can you give some specific examples of how this process has worked?	. . . . Get a copy of the *Elementary School Promotion Policy*, which spells out some procedures that are supposed to be followed when students are doing poorly in reading. Ask for any additional written documents concerning steps the school takes. Check principal's answers through interviews with teachers and parents.

Principal Interview	Additional Evidence
d. What kinds of activities do you carry out in this school to prepare students to take the Iowa Tests? What procedures do you use to insure that irregularities don't occur either in preparing students to take the test or in the process of test administration? What percent of your students were tested and counted in your school's averages? (If the percent is less than 90%, ask why.)	. . . . Obtain and review in advance the testing data for the school in *Test Scores and Selected School Characteristics*, including the percent of students in the school who were tested. Ask for written documentation of procedures for test preparation and administration. Check principal's answers through teacher and parent interviews.
Rating ☐ **Ingredient 9. STAFF DEVELOPMENT IS TIED TO SPECIFIC SCHOOL GOALS.** *Staff development programs help teachers achieve the priority educational goals for the school. (See pages 41 to 43 for background information.)*	
a. Can you tell me what kinds of staff development activities of each of the following types go on in the school: i. Workshops ii. Staff meetings to plan and share ideas iii. Observing teachers and giving them advice iv. Visits to other schools How often does each type of activity occur? Please describe some typical examples of each.	. . . . Ask for written documents relevant to these different types of staff development procedures. Check principal's answers through teacher interviews.
b. What do you see as the ingredients of staff development activities that make them really helpful to teachers? Can you give some examples of staff development programs here that have been especially successful?	. . . . Check principal's answers through teacher interviews.
c. Please explain how the staff development activities that take place here are tied to your specific priorities for improving the educational program here. Please give some examples.	. . . . Check principal's answers through teacher interviews and classroom observations. Weigh principal's answers against his earlier comments about his priorities for improving the school.
d. Do teachers have a voice in deciding what kinds of staff development activities will be carried out here? Please give some examples.	. . . . Check principal's answers through teacher interviews.

Principal Interview	Additional Evidence
Rating ☐ **Ingredient 10. SPECIAL PROGRAMS ARE CAREFULLY DESIGNED.** *Special programs (bilingual education, special education, Chapter 1, and so on) are of high quality, are carefully matched to student needs, and are coordinated closely with the overall learning program of the school. (See pages 43 to 47 for background information.)*	. . . . Obtain the following basic descriptions of bilingual education, special education, and Chapter 1 -- *Bilingual Program Facts, A Parent's Guide: The Educational Rights of Handicapped Children,* and *A Parent's Guide to the Education Consolidation and Improvement Act -- Chapter 1.*
a. What are the special programs (bilingual education, special education, Chapter 1, and so on) that operate in this school? Are there special programs that operate in other schools to which you send students from here? How many students are in each of your special programs here? Briefly, what is the purpose of each program and how does it operate?	. . . . Ask for documentation of program enrollments. Compare principal's program descriptions with documents cited above that describe how programs are supposed to work. Check principal's answers through teacher and parent interviews.
b. If a teacher or parent believes that a child might need a special program, what are the steps that take place for assessing and placing the child? What steps do you take to try to modify the regular classroom situation and avoid the need to put a child in a special program? What steps do you take to make sure a child who needs a special program gets into the right one?	. . . . Compare principal's answers with documents cited above that describe how students are supposed to be assessed and placed. Check principal's answers through teacher and parent interviews.
c. How do you, as the principal, oversee the special programs in your school to make sure that they are of high quality? Please give some examples. What criteria do you use in judging the quality of the various special programs?	. . . . Check principal's answers through teacher and parent interviews and through classroom observations.
d. What steps do you take to make sure that there is coordination between the regular and special programs, especially when they are working with the same students? Please give some examples. What steps do you take to coordinate the transition, when a child moves from a special program back to the regular classroom?	. . . . Check principal's answers through teacher and parent interviews.

GETTING KEY DOCUMENTS AND DATA

In the Principal Interview and in the "Additional Evidence" column beside the interview questions, we cite key documents and data that will be helpful to you. The Chicago Public Schools operates under a strong state-wide Freedom of Information Act and a strong school system policy for public access to information. Because of these requirements, you have a right to the documents and data that we have mentioned.

School principals are specifically required to provide information to the public under the school board's policy. Thus, you should first try to obtain documents and data directly from the school principal. If the principal is unable to obtain particular information or is uncooperative, you should contact the school system's Department of Communications (address and telephone number at the end of this section). If you have difficulties in obtaining information through the Department of Communications, Designs for Change (address and telephone number at the end of this section) will be happy to advise you about the next steps.

Below, we first explain how to obtain each document mentioned, indicating, where appropriate, the school system department or the organization from which it can be obtained. Then, we provide a listing of the addresses and telephone numbers of these departments and organizations.

DOCUMENTS THAT YOU SHOULD OBTAIN

Bilingual Program Facts by the Chicago Public Schools. Available in a number of languages. Copies of this booklet and other informational materials about the bilingual education program are available from local schools and from the Department of Multilingual Education, Chicago Public Schools.

Elementary School Promotion Policy by the Chicago Public Schools. Copies of this entire policy, as well as a summary for parents, are available from local schools and the Department of Communications, Chicago Public Schools.

Implementation Handbook for the Comprehensive Reading Program by the Chicago Public Schools. Copies of the full handbook, as well as a summary for parents, are available from the local schools and the Department of Communications, Chicago Public Schools.

Not Just Punishment: Discipline in Schools That Work by Alternative Schools Network and Designs for Change. In Spanish and English. Copies are available from Designs for Change. $4 per copy, including postage.

A Parent's Guide: The Educational Rights of Handicapped Children by the Illinois State Board of Education. In English and Spanish. Copies are available from the Illinois State Board of Education, Department of Specialized Educational Services.

A Parent's Guide to the Education Consolidation and Improvement Act --Chapter 1 by the Chicago Public Schools. Copies are available from local schools and the Department of Government Funded Programs, Chicago Public Schools.

Procedures for Access to Information by the Public by the Chicago Public Schools. Copies of the full set of procedures, as well as a brief summary, are available from local schools and the Department of Communications, Chicago Public Schools.

Test Scores and Selected School Characteristics by the Chicago Public Schools. Designs for Change will provide single copies of the profiles of individual schools upon request. The Department of Communications, Chicago Public Schools, has office copies of this publication and will photocopy school profiles for you.

Uniform Discipline Code by Chicago Public Schools. In English and Spanish. Copies are available from local schools and the Department of Communications, Chicago Public Schools.

INFORMATION SOURCES

Department of Communications, Chicago Public Schools, 160 West Wendell Street, Room 301, Chicago, Illinois 60610. Phone 312/280-3750.

Department of Government Funded Programs, Chicago Public Schools, 1819 West Pershing Road, Sixth Floor, East Building, Chicago, Illinois 60609. Phone 312/890-8142.

Department of Multilingual Education, Chicago Public Schools, 1819 West Pershing Road, Sixth Floor, East Building, Chicago, Illinois 60609. Phone 312/890-8060.

Designs for Change, 220 South State Street, Suite 1616, Chicago, Illinois 60604. Phone 312/922-0317.

Illinois State Board of Education, Department of Specialized Educational Services, 100 North First Street, Springfield, Illinois 62777. Phone 217/782-6601.

Chicago SCHOOLWATCH:
Campaign for Effective Schools

Chicago SCHOOLWATCH is a long-term campaign with one overriding goal: to bring major concrete improvements in each Chicago public school, so that almost every student will learn to read well. SCHOOLWATCH helps parents analyze their local schools and press for changes. SCHOOLWATCH also aides business people, community groups, journalists, and educators who want to bring about real improvements in the way students are taught day-to-day. Because the quality of local schools is affected by policies and practices at the school district, state, and federal levels, SCHOOLWATCH also presses for reform at these levels of the educational system.

The SCHOOLWATCH Campaign is a long-term project of Designs for Change, a non-profit research and children's advocacy group committed to improving public schools in Chicago and Illinois. If you want to join SCHOOLWATCH or receive other SCHOOLWATCH information, please contact us at: *Designs for Change, 220 South State Street, Suite 1616, Chicago, Illinois 60604, (312) 922-0317.*

The principal writers for this handbook were Donald Moore and Mary O'Connell, aided greatly by Sharon Weitzman Soltman, Joan Jeter Slay, Sonia Silva-Alvarez, Earl Durham, Marilyn Katz, Ed Sehr, Rita Gallegos, and Rod Smith. The handbook was designed and produced by Kathy Blair Yates, Jean Newcomer, Marilyn Lewis, Carol Ouimette, and Janis Boehm. Peggy Lipschutz illustrated the handbook.

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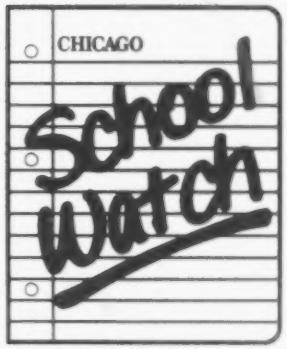

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

Campaign for
Effective Schools

Campaña para
Lograr Escuelas Efectivas

I am applying for membership in Chicago SCHOOLWATCH. I believe **all our kids can learn to read.**

_____ _____
signature *date*

Please check the appropriate boxes -- are you:

- ☐ parent
- ☐ student
- ☐ teacher
- ☐ administrator
- ☐ other: _____

For parents, teachers, administrators, and employees -- please list:

_____ _____
school name *district number*

Please PRINT your name and address:

_____ _____
name *telephone number(s)*

_____ _____
address *city/state/zip*

_____
group affiliation

Members will receive a Membership Card, SCHOOLWATCH newsletters, and admission to city-wide training sessions.

A project of
Designs for Change
220 South State Street
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312-922-0017